SHIDEN KANZAKI

ILLUSTRATION BY SAKI UKAI

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BLACK BULLET
VENGEANCE IS MINE
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SHIDEN KANZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SAKI UKAI

Red dots suddenly appeared in the darkness. When Rentaro realized that they were all the red eyes of Gastrea, he gave an involuntary groan. "There's no way..."

"TENDO MARTIAL ARTS SWORD DRAWING FIRST STYLE, NUMBER 8— *MUEI MUSOU.*"
"KISARA, GET BACK!"
"WE'RE GOING DOWN, RENTARO!"

"This is good..." It was a little salty, but they probably thought that on a battlefield, it was better to have strong-tasting foods. It was hard to believe that these were made from canned rations and ready-made food packages.

"Hah, how about it? What do you think of me now?" It was Tamaki, who sounded proud as he rubbed his nose.

Once the meal was devoured, they were filled with a languid satisfaction. It wasn't that there was a lot of food. In fact, since their storehouse had burned down in yesterday's fighting, the amount of food they'd been given wasn't enough to match the needs of all the civil officers who were left. Even so, the sense of relief they felt that all eight of them had survived the battlefield and were able to share another meal together overrode the physical shortage of food and gave them comfort.

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BLACK BULLET

VENGEANCE IS MINE

4

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

BLACK BULLET 4

CHAPTER 03

THE THRESHOLD OF VICTORY

I know two things about you.

One is that you were born.

The other is that you will die someday.

—*Hyrum Smith*

BLACK BULLET 4

CHAPTER 03

THE THRESHOLD OF VICTORY

1

"It's begun, Satomi."

At Kisara's reverential whisper, Rentaro frowned. But before he could say another word, she spoke again.

"Look at the Monolith."

Rentaro raised his gaze from the ground to look. A ripple of shock went from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. First, a corner of the rectangle collapsed. But that immediately led to the next collapse. Finally, the enormous body of the cracked Monolith couldn't stand up against the Varanium corrosion fluid any longer and let out a scream, and then nothing could stop the chain reaction of structural failure.

From where Rentaro was, he couldn't hear the sound of the actual collapse, but that made the shriek of the Monolith a moment before even clearer. Abruptly, the whole bleached pane became fatally splintered, and the Monolith looked like it was shrugging its shoulders as it disintegrated. Chills went down his spine with it.

The Monolith fell like time-lapse photography, starting from its base with fragments flaking off the top. In no time, it would crash into the ground. As he

watched, there came a roar, and then they were hit with a shock wave rumbling the ground, forcing Rentaro to raise his arms and grit his teeth. The vibration shook Rentaro from his feet to his guts, and the shock wave blew away the surrounding debris, rotting signs, and sheet metal that had fallen.

When Rentaro lifted his face, he saw the sky was covered by a cloud of dust and fine particles. “No way…”

It was starting. The Third Kanto Battle was starting—and not when they were planning for it to start.

“Satomi!” Kisara yelled.

“I know!” Rentaro fixed his eyes on the broken Monolith once more and ran toward the battlefield. No matter what, he couldn’t leave Enju, so he ran down the stairs from the roof and through the police station. Inside the station was chaos, with everyone pointing and screaming at Monolith 32 in the window.

“Enju!” He found her sitting in the waiting room, looking down dejectedly.

“Rentaro…” Enju looked at him and slowly tried to put a cheerful expression on her face. It was painful to watch.

“Enju, let’s go.”

Enju looked like she didn’t understand. “Go where?”

“What do you mean, ‘where’? To the base at the front lines! The Monolith collapsed!”

The girl turned her head, seemingly noticing the frantic screams and fleeing bodies around her for the first time. “It…collapsed?”

Rentaro shuddered. “You… Don’t tell me you hadn’t noticed?”

Even though it was so loud…

Enju shook her head. “I noticed. It’s just…I was just a little spaced out, is all.”

Rentaro didn’t reply; he simply closed his eyes. Enju had just heard the news of the death of her classmates this morning. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t want to put her on the battlefield. However, the current situation was not so kind.

“Rentaro, I’ll jump with you on my back,” said Enju.

“No, that’s okay… Let’s run,” said Rentaro.

“Why?”

“Just do it.” Rentaro took Enju’s hand and they hurried outside. He tried to flag down a nearby taxi but soon realized it was futile. The cars were fleeing, scattering whether or not there were passengers riding in them, and now all he could see were people running around screaming.

When they hit a thoroughfare, the conditions were even worse. The six-lane street was in a state of confusion, with cars at a standstill and horns honking in a loud chorus; all the while people were abandoning their cars to get just a little farther away from Monolith 32.

Rentaro and Enju bumped into shoulder after shoulder as they ran through the crowd, running in the opposite direction as everyone else. No matter how much time passed, they could not find a ride. There was no train station nearby, and even if they *had* been able to make it to a station, there was no guarantee that trains would be running on their usual schedule in this state of emergency.

In the meantime, they passed through to the neighboring District 40. There were fewer people there, and it was mostly filled with abandoned buildings. As they ran, he swept his gaze left and right: Even though Rentaro’s body was moving at full speed, his brain was calmly analyzing their current situation.

There was still quite some distance between them and the civil officers’ base at the front lines. So, it was obvious that he would not be able to continue running at the speed he was now, overexerting himself. Wasn’t there anything he could do?

There were scooters, motorcycles, and cars around them, but the former two were covered in rust and pretty much totaled; the latter were missing tires and had their hoods open, their parts looted.

But shortly after, he glimpsed a bicycle hidden in the crack of a building. After a quick inspection, he found it in usable shape despite showing its age; it had air in its tires and had had maintenance done. A resident of the Outer Districts had fixed it and had been using it, no doubt. It was a granny bike with thin tires and a

child seat strapped to the back.

However, a joint-type bike lock connected the body of the bike to the pole next to it. Rentaro looked left and right and apologized silently to the owner, vowing to return it later. Drawing the gun from his hip, he took three steps back and aimed. He carefully pulled the trigger and fired, and the bullet blew the lock away.

Sitting astride the saddle, he put Enju behind him and pedaled hard. The bike seemed to stretch as it accelerated, shooting through the streets of the Outer Districts. A sudden warning siren rang in his ears, and he lifted his face in surprise, looking around him. The siren roared high and low, coming at them from all directions.

“A biohazard warning?” he said. In the ten years after the war, no matter how dangerous a Pandemic crisis Tokyo faced, this warning had never been sounded, but now, it was echoing around them, ringing like crazy.

Then, another strange thing occurred: After a loud screech pierced his ears, a large black mass came toward them from the northern sky. Suddenly, the street was covered by a dark shadow, and Rentaro and Enju, who were going full speed on the bike, were completely surrounded by it, their world turning dark. It was so dark that it could have been mistaken for night.

He soon realized what the black mass was. Birds. A group of birds of various species and sizes screeched noisily as they flew away in the opposite direction of the fallen Monolith. So even the birds had started their escape—they seemed to know instinctively that Tokyo Area had no future.

Enju made a fist with her hand, which was wrapped around Rentaro’s waist from behind, and he could feel sweat on his palm. Rentaro pedaled even harder and shifted into high gear. Before he knew it, the handlebars, too, were slick with sweat. He naturally lifted his pelvis as he sat and rounded his back to reduce air resistance, rising into a racer’s stance.

He raced around the utility poles that were bent back and forth and the useless traffic lights, weaving his way through the cars lying around like an obstacle course, leaning this way and that to avoid them. Avoiding the traffic signals enabled him to save more time than he expected.

After the Monolith collapsed, they would definitely see Aldebaran's troops start moving. Unfortunately, the self-defense troops who were stationed downwind had been showered with the dense mineral dust from the collapse and were probably in a state of panic. The problem was whether or not they would be able to regroup and attack before the Gastrea arrived.

Getting onto a highway, Rentaro stood up and pedaled to climb the small hill. There was a cliff to his right with a guardrail next to it. Climbing the hill required a lot of stamina, and he was soon panting, his calves straining, but he finally made it to the top, where a cool breeze whipped around his body.

Looking over, he saw that the tracks of the overhead train line running parallel to them were blocked with piles of clay roof tiles and blocks that had been blown over. He was right to not head toward the train station after all. It would be impossible for them to run.

Abruptly, he thought he felt a tire hop and gave a small yell. His inattention brought calamity, and he ran over a rock on the curb. The bike fluctuated wildly.

"Rentaro! In front of you!" Enju shouted.

Before him, the guardrail in front of the approaching cliff had been scraped away. The cliff below was steep, and the forest beyond seemed very small and far away. If they fell, it would be instant death.

He yanked the handlebars to the left and released the power of his artificial leg. The artificial skin and his uniform on his right leg were torn off as he fired cartridges out of the limb. From the thruster, there was an instant of bursting sparks as their inertia adjusted. Resistance in the pedals disappeared as he lifted his feet, and they accelerated so much that it seemed like they were going to be thrown off. But they turned at the last minute, and followed the curve of the guardrail.

Rentaro was in shock from the close call. They definitely couldn't afford to be injured in a place like this. Still, he didn't slow down as he continued.

Finally, the base at the front lines came into view. Even from far away, he could see clearly how the civil officers were flustered. They were trying to make the formations they had learned in a hurry, but they were confused, and their lack of experience was already being exposed.

By the time Rentaro had left the bike in front of their tent and rushed to the front of the squad tent, the rest of his team members were already talking things over in a circle.

When Kisara saw Rentaro, her eyes widened. “Satomi, how did you get here? Even Tina and I just got here a minute ago—”

Rentaro’s whole body was covered in sweat, and he tried to calm his ragged breathing. He placed both hands on his knees and somehow managed to raise his head, then wiped his mouth with a sleeve. “I’ll tell you later. We’re going, too!”

It took some time for the civil officers to recover from the confusion caused by the unexpected destruction of the Monolith. The destruction of the enormous rectangular structure standing 1.618 kilometers high and 1 kilometer wide produced an enormous amount of dust and ash that was blown upward into a heavy cloud. In little time, it covered the sky of Tokyo Area and hid the sun.

The prediction from the Japanese government office had included the shock wave from the collapse, the ashes, and the irregular weather, but there was a big difference between hearing about it and actually seeing it in person, and the strangeness of it forced Rentaro into feeling like the world was ending. Even so, he and the other civil officers managed to complete their battle formation in about three hours, but that did not seem to be the case for the self-defense force on the front lines. Because of the wind, the ashes from the Monolith were blown directly at the self-defense force's camp. But even with that, they were able to rally because of their regular training and their reputation as defenders of the country.

At around 7 p.m., even though it was summer, the sky had turned an indigo blue, and it was finally time for the invasion of Aldebaran's troops. From where Rentaro and the others were, the back of the SDF formation was too far away to see Aldebaran's troops beyond them, but the clouds of dust their enemies kicked up as they marched forward in lines blurred the horizon, and the low, beastly roar of their voices gave Rentaro goose bumps. They had probably gone around the fallen Monolith before finally making it inside the city.

It was the omen of an unavoidable Great Extinction. He'd watched the scene on a video-streaming site many times—when Gastrea invaded a broken line of Monoliths, the possibility that the people living in that city would all be killed was 100 percent, and up until now, there had been no example of any city avoiding the Great Extinction once a wall went down.

The next instant, someone opened fire.

The self-defense force's long-range weapons—self-propelled guns, tank guns, and automatic cannons—all fired at once, drawing a dazzling arc as they rushed into the enemy Gastrea. The next instant, there was an explosion. The first lines of Gastrea were blown away spouting flames, and the next line of them plunged in deeper than the first.

A crimson battlefield appeared, and the sky burned. The shock wave came later and reached even Rentaro, and the hot wind of the battlefield hit his whole body. Rentaro lifted his arm to shield his face and narrowed his eyes beneath his hand. Looking at the scorching-red sky, Rentaro felt a throbbing pain at the base

of his artificial right arm.

It was the same. He had seen the same sky ten years ago. It was the hell that the young Rentaro had seen at the end of the Gastrea War: Gastrea had invaded the area where he had been living, and he had been pushed onto a train and sent to live with the Tendo family. On the way to Tokyo, he'd seen different battlefields from the window of that train—burning cities, burning farms, burning people. At the boundary between the jet-black sky and the red flames, the endless indigo blue gradation had warped and burned its image onto Rentaro's retina.

The passengers had shoved in close together and were all shaking and crying inside the train car, finally resorting to prayer—quietly, to themselves, of course. The fact that the train had arrived in Tokyo without being overturned or derailed by Gastrea was a miracle in and of itself.

Rentaro squeezed his chest and tried to check the unpleasant sweat pouring out of him with all his might, trying desperately to put a lid on the terrible memories.

Five hours passed in the way, until the time read midnight. The battlefield was locked in night, and it became a night battle in earnest. The sky was closed off with the ashes of the Monolith, so there was no moon, and there were no streetlamps in the Outer Districts, so it was surprisingly dark.

From the midst of all that, Rentaro could intermittently hear the deafening roar of tank guns and shock-wave blasts that shook the atmosphere. There were the flames of 25-mm machine guns firing rhythmically like a typewriter. In the spaces between, he could hear the groans of Gastrea, followed by their angry cries and screams.

And, just as he had predicted, the self-defense force never asked for support from the civil officers no matter how much time had passed.

Rentaro was growing impatient. What were they thinking? Did they really think that they could win this war holding on to worthless things like distinguished service, territoriality, and pride? Shouldn't they attack the Gastrea as one right now? Who was even winning? What was the current state of the war?

When Rentaro turned his head to look at the civil officer troops' battle

formation, he saw that even though they had built campfires, many also watched the proceedings anxiously.

From atop a small hill, Rentaro and his group could see the situation of all the squads clearly. His group was a kilometer in front of where the frontline base tent had been built, and they were spread out to the side as they waited. The troop, made up of a little over a thousand civil officers, was grouped into adjuvants, and they were placed under the charge of a company commander in sets of ten. The one in charge of the company commanders was Troop Commander Nagamasa Gado.

Diagonally in front of Rentaro to the right, he could see the superior officer directly above him in rank, the company commander. Apparently, all the company commanders had been selected from Gado's adjuvant, and this one was a young man equipped with a lead-colored, Japanese armor-type exoskeleton. His name was Hidehiko Gado, and he was the biological son of the general commander, Nagamasa. He had a pale face with hollow cheeks, with a long, thin face and glasses. He looked like an academic who was always shut up in research labs that didn't get any sun, or perhaps a librarian.

Next to him was an Initiator named Kokone. At training the day before yesterday, Hidehiko had rubbed her shoulders, lifted her chin, and stared at her profile entranced. It looked like he had feelings for his Initiator beyond that of a partner or family member.

Looking at Hidehiko, Rentaro couldn't help but feel uneasy. Even in just these last few days that the civil officer troops had spent training together, Hidehiko's clumsiness was apparent. It wasn't just that he passed down orders slowly—he seemed to lack the ability to make decisions, and Rentaro didn't feel any confidence or dignity from the man's orders.

Even now, as he held his partner Initiator's shoulders, he looked like he was desperately mumbling a prayer. He was probably praying that the SDF would win and that he would not have to take his turn.

Behind adjuvant leader Rentaro was the president of the Tendo Civil Security Agency, Kisara Tendo, and her partner, Tina Sprout, who was holding an antitank rifle almost as tall as she was. And then there was the president of the Katagiri

Civil Security Agency, Tamaki Katagiri, and his little sister, Yuzuki Katagiri. Also waiting were Rentaro's senior disciple in the Tendo Martial Arts, Shoma Nagisawa, and his partner, Midori Fuse. They were all filled with nervousness, and they were holding their weapons at the ready so they could rush out and fight at any time.

And right next to Rentaro was—

"Rentaro, do you think the self-defense force will win?" Rentaro stole a sideways glance at Enju Aihara's profile, her nervous face staring far out over the horizon.

Even as Rentaro felt impatient, he closed his eyes firmly and tried to change his thinking. Right now, he could not prioritize Enju. He had to prioritize what they were doing.

How much time had passed?

The gunfire slowly grew sparse, and the voices of the Gastrea faded. And then abruptly, both of those sounds disappeared.

On the flat plain in front of him spread darkness that seemed to absorb the stillness of night. Agitation spread noisily, like ripples, among the civil officers. Rentaro overheard people saying:

"Hey, what happened?"

"Who won?"

"Someone go look."

Rentaro felt a sudden tap on his shoulder and turned around to see Shoma looking at him with a grave expression on his face. "What do you think, Satomi?"

"I don't know… But thinking about it rationally, the self-defense force probably won." Rentaro stopped talking and looked up, into the darkness. "Right now, I can't hear the voices of the Gastrea or the sound of the cannons. It's probably because they drove the Gastrea away."

He had said that mainly to make himself feel better. Then, he looked at Hidehiko Gado. "Hey, you. Why don't you try sending a flare up to headquarters to sound things out?"

The oval-faced company commander shook his head like there was no way he could. “None of the other squads are doing that, are they? We can’t act arbitrarily on our own!”

Rentaro was about to protest that they should do it *because* no one else was doing it but then shook his head. This man’s thinking was so different from his own that it didn’t matter what Rentaro said.

Suddenly, Tina, who had been peering into the darkness quietly this whole time, murmured quietly, “Big Brother, someone’s coming.”

“You can see them?” Rentaro asked. Then, he remembered that Tina was an Initiator with the Owl Factor in her body. Her eyes had the ability to amplify even the tiniest bit of light and project it onto her field of vision.

“Yes, there are people walking this way. And it’s not just one or two of them.”

Before long, as if backing up Tina’s words, shadows of people appeared blurrily about a hundred meters in front of them, near where the limit of the light of the bonfires reached, and he could see shadows walking toward them.

There were about fifty people walking in a line, side by side. They were all SDF officers wearing digital camouflage that met the technical specifications for the year 2031. Among the civil officers an obvious sense of relief spread, and Rentaro could see some civil officers break rank to rush forward and tend to them.

But Rentaro felt uneasy.

Thinking about it rationally, they probably came to report that they successfully drove away the Gastrea. But then, why did they send so many people? It would have been enough to radio the information over, so they couldn’t all be messengers. Even if he allowed that they would send messengers, then one, or at most, two, would have been enough. And they weren’t even riding motorcycles.

Slowly, they grew bigger in his field of vision. They seemed to be injured and were walking unsteadily. Seeing them, the Initiator from the team right next to Rentaro couldn’t help but rush out toward them. She was a girl about eight years old. As an Initiator, she was probably just barely old enough to bear fighting. She

had soft curly hair, and she looked kind. As she rushed toward the injured fighters, she peeked up at the faces from below, showing consideration for the soldiers. Then, abruptly, she stopped moving.

At that moment, Rentaro also noticed something out of place. The soldiers were walking calmly, even as they held in their intestines that were spilling out of their stomachs. And they had gotten close enough that their expressions could be seen—their faces were ashen and their lips blue. The blood spilling out of their cut stomachs soaked bright red into their camouflage uniforms. From their half-open lips came cryptic groans.

There was no question that they had lost more than a fatal amount of blood. It was an unpleasant sight that they were all too familiar with, and they all got chills.

Rentaro called out to the girl. “Get away! Don’t go near them!”

The girl turned back, looking like she was about to cry.

Suddenly, everything above her neck disappeared. The next instant, blood spurted forcefully into the air like a geyser. The girl’s legs became tangled, and her body fell forward.

There was a stifling stink of blood. Right next to Rentaro, there was a thud as something about the size of a basketball fell to the ground.

He froze with his eyes wide open. He could not for the life of him find the courage to turn his head a little to look there.

As if waiting for that moment, all the soldiers’ bodies burst open from the inside. What appeared from each was eight legs that included a set of two large pincers. Bodies, flattened, slid parallel to the ground, but their backs arched and at the tips of their gigantic tails shone things that looked like sharpened blades.

Arachnids—mottled scorpion Gastrea—appeared, attacking with red eyes glittering. One made a giant leap into the adjuvant next to them. Even though it was still a larva, it was so sudden that they were too late and were cut, screaming with a shower of blood.

Looking around, Rentaro could hear screams and shouts from different directions, and their ranks became a melee. Just then, from the centerline where

the general commander was, a howitzer shot something into the air with a long white trail of smoke. It stretched far and then opened up a parachute high in the sky. It scattered oxidizing materials, combustible materials, flame-coloring materials, and brightening materials that were fastened to the lower part of it into the sky, giving birth to a small sun.

It was a flare.

One after another, parachutes opened, and in no time, a number of lights were in the air, greatly expanding how far they could see. Rentaro shielded his eyes with his hand and narrowed his eyes.

Then, he took a step backward in shock.

The strong light exposed a small mountain of countless silhouettes. They were probably two or three kilometers ahead. They were all various types of Gastrea, big and small. As if they had been waiting for that moment, red dots suddenly appeared in the darkness. When Rentaro realized that they were all the red eyes of Gastrea, he gave an involuntary groan. In order to approach the civil officer camp unnoticed, they had closed their eyes and tread softly.

What was really frightening was their number. The Seitenshi's prediction was that there were about two thousand Gastrea gathered outside the walls, but this was at least twice that. The self-defense force that was supposed to act as the advance guard was nowhere to be seen. And yet, the vanished SDF troops and the additional Gastrea seemed to balance each other out in his mental arithmetic.

"There's no way…" His stomach dropped, and he felt like hurling. How did the Gastrea Legion manage to defeat the entire self-defense force? The SDF should have had the knowledge to completely shut out the Gastrea the way they had in the Second Kanto Battle.

The Gastrea realized they had been exposed by the flares, and so, no longer needing to hide, they looked toward the sky en masse and gave a loud howl. The air rumbled, sending Rentaro's skin prickling. Finally, a conspicuously large Gastrea at the front rushed toward them, and the rest followed, one after another, making a number of rhombus-shaped battle formations. The front line drove toward the civil officers in a straight line, tips of their swords aimed

forward.

The invaders let out a rumbling war cry, one that sent a crack through the ground and clouds of dirt alike, to the point where it was hard to tell if it was the ground shaking or the entire earth. Sweat poured from Rentaro's frame, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

What was with these Gastrea that could follow orders? They didn't look like a troop of Gastrea, they looked like a school of fish that had gathered together, resembling one giant organism. Even humans who had trained for years would have had a hard time moving together like this.

Just then, a piercing pain stabbed into Rentaro's head. He felt like he had noticed something important, but the thought had dispersed before becoming clear.

Enju came close to him with an uneasy expression on her face and squeezed Rentaro's palm tightly.

The Gastrea were less than two kilometers away.

The civil officer troops were also experiencing a precipitous drop in morale. Even battle-hardened veterans were struck with fear.

"E-everyone, prepare for battle!" Hidehiko instructed his subordinate adjuvants, but his voice shook, and the hand he raised into the air was weak.

"Everyone, prepare for battle!" Rentaro repeated the order. Realizing that his own voice also sounded slightly nervous, he made an effort to stop his teeth's chattering. He drew his XD gun from his hip and pulled the slide so it would be ready to fire at a moment's notice.

The Gastrea were one kilometer away.

As the Gastrea slowly closed in on them, every single one of the civil officer troops seemed racked with nerves.

Five hundred meters away.

Reinforcing the front lines were the crustacean-and beetle-type Gastrea. Their forewings and bodies hardened with keratin and chitin were made into even harder armor by the Gastrea factor, and they glittered as they reflected the

flares they were being hit with one after another.

An adjuvant line that was equipped with rifles took a step forward and fired them at the commander's signal. There was the dry sound of bullets firing while muzzle flashes dazzled their eyes. The NATO-standard, high-speed Varanium rifle cartridges rushed into the first line of Gastrea. They were bullets optimized for destroying the insides of Gastrea, and would change into a mushroom shape to expand the wounds. The Gastrea's flesh would be ripped apart in the display of attack power. That was what was supposed to happen.

Rentaro let out an involuntary shout.

The Gastrea did not fall. Surprisingly, the beetle Gastrea in the front row did not stop even after receiving wounds that would have incapacitated normal Gastrea long ago. The rifle squad faltered, but they soon fired again continuously. Over the sound of blood splattering and flesh ripping apart was the strange sound of the Gastrea roaring with all their might.

They finally brought down a few Gastrea after blowing their heads off, but those were soon trampled and detoured around, and a hopeless number of Gastrea gushed forth. The number that had been taken down was a lot smaller. It was as if they could not feel pain.

Rentaro didn't really understand what had happened, but instinctively, he understood one of the ways they had broken through the SDF.

Three hundred meters away.

"Big Brother, over there!" Tina shouted.

Rentaro put his face next to Tina's. She was pointing at something in the air. At first, it was too dark to see anything, but then a flare exploded close by. A squad of flying Gastrea appeared in the area where the veil of darkness had been lifted. There were a little less than fifty of them.

The problem was the round objects they were carrying between their front and back legs: other Gastrea. In other words, paratroopers. When that realization struck, chills shot down Rentaro's spine.

The flying Gastrea seemed uncomfortable at having light shined on them and tilted their bodies to move away from it, taking a large detour around the air

above the civil officer troops and going behind even the area where they had set up tents, landing in the forest behind the backs of the civil officer troops. They released the Gastrea they were holding and then returned to the front lines.

Rentaro looked at Tina. “Did you see that, Tina?”

Tina paused. “Yes,” she said. Seeming to understand the seriousness of the situation, Tina gave a quiet nod. That was probably a detached force sent to attack the civil officer troops in a pincer attack.

Rentaro looked around, but it did not look like anyone else had noticed. Rentaro made up his mind and ran, going for the front line where Hidehiko Gado was commanding the rifle squad. When he got there, he put his hand on the man’s shoulder and whirled him around. “There’s a detached force behind us. We’re going to be caught in a pincer attack. Let us go fight it.”

“Don’t you understand that this is no time for that?!” shouted Hidehiko.

“If they get through from behind, then it really will be over. We’ll be completely wiped out!”

Hidehiko waved his arm in front of him with bloodshot eyes. “Right now, we have to deal with the Gastrea in front of us. Get back in line, Satomi!”

Rentaro wanted to object more, but he controlled himself. Turning around, he went back to his adjuvant, where everyone on his team was waiting for him with uneasy expressions.

“Satomi, what is it?” Kisara asked on behalf of the group, meeting his eyes. He hesitated for a second but then explained the developments as briefly as possible.

“That’s serious!” said Tamaki, taken aback.

Shoma watched Rentaro silently as he listened. “Satomi, what do you want to do?”

“I want to go fight the enemy on our own.”

Enju looked uneasy. “Rentaro, but that means…”

Rentaro nodded silently. That would mean disobeying orders from his superior officer, Hidehiko Gado. During the civil officer training they had undergone these

past few days, Rentaro and the others had been given detailed instructions about the severe punishment that awaited them if they disobeyed orders.

Yuzuki contemplated for a while, and then looked to Rentaro. “You decide, Rentaro Satomi. I’ll do as you say, Leader.”

The adjuvant members all looked upon him as well, waiting expectantly for his decision.

“I…” he started.

Just then, a thunderous shout reached their ears. “Cease fire!”

When Rentaro turned to look, he saw that the rifle squad was moving back under Hidehiko’s instructions, passing the baton to the civil officers who had close-combat weapons. Rentaro’s adjuvant had more close-combat fighters, so they were supposedly part of that group. Rentaro and the others moved forward, as if being pushed by the rifle squad and their paranoid gazes.

The Gastrea were a hundred meters away.

The rumbling of treaded ground combined with war cries to bring about the thunderous roar of the Gastrea. There was no sign of the enemy decreasing. What was going on?

Rentaro’s sense of crisis increased. No matter how he thought about it, he was far from being able to take an optimistic view of the situation. Looking left and right, he saw that the other adjuvants shared his anxiety.

A young man to his right with hair sticking up like a rockhopper penguin was coincidentally the leader of the adjuvant next to them at camp, as well. Even though Rentaro was often hated by other civil officers for being an upstart, when the young man found out Rentaro was ranked 300, he put his hand on Rentaro’s shoulder and said with an affable smile, “I’m proud to be fighting next to you.”

Rentaro ground his clenched teeth together. If he left right now, there was a possibility that the space left by his absence would cause the death of Hidehiko Gado or the neighboring leader. They were getting close to the time limit. A little longer and Rentaro would be saved by the easy ending that they had run out of time. In that sense, the choice of not choosing anything was undeniably an option.

However, if the surprise Gastrea attack squad reached them without being noticed and they were completely overtaken from behind, they would lose more than ten or a hundred people. The last breakwater would burst, and Gastrea would flow into Tokyo Area.

Rentaro took deep breath after deep breath and looked forward. This was no time to hesitate. It was time to move. “Let’s go.” He turned as he said this, and everyone nodded gravely.

Watching each Promoter put arms around his or her Initiator, Rentaro also stood next to Enju and put an arm around her waist; she put her strong arm around his. His eyes met Enju’s; her black ones turned a deep crimson. The next instant, he was hit with pressure pushing down on his body. It had been a while since he had last felt the acceleration that seemed like it would blow him away. Enju had awakened her Rabbit Factor.

They flew over the sky above the columns of civil officers in large parabolas, heading for the back. Rentaro’s uniform flapped in the gale, and it was hard to open his eyes in the wall of air pressing in on him. When Rentaro’s feet touched the ground again, he gasped as he pulled air into his lungs.

Looking back at what they had left behind, he saw that most of the people were staring at them with their mouths open, not understanding what had just happened. However, one person—Hidehiko—grasped his fist tightly, shaking with anger.

Rentaro felt a second of guilt, but he soon shifted his concentration on what was in front of him. Checking to make sure his whole team had followed, he went through the frontline base where they had camped for the last few days and into the forest that had been at their backs until now.

Rentaro squinted through the wall of air that came at him and instructed Enju and the others to gather in the forest. It was dark there, and full of sticky, humid summer air. Once together, he made sure everyone knew the rough position of where the Gastrea had been last spotted, and then set off. The group moved by holding on to the Initiators, borrowing their ability to move at high speeds. With the Owl and Cat in the lead with their night vision, the adjuvant members jumped through the tops of the trees like ninjas.

Leaves grazed Rentaro's cheeks, and his gaze went left and right dizzyingly. Enju landed on a thin branch, and crouched to start another massive leap. This time, his chin was pulled down, and his vision rose and fell, practically giving him vertigo.

Kisara, who had just newly formed a pair with Tina, looked like she was having a hard time with the girl's freely changing directions, but Rentaro couldn't say anything because he was having a hard enough time trying not to be thrown off by Enju's superfast acceleration.

Inside the still forest, four pairs forming a total of eight people were advancing, rustling the leaves as they jumped.

Rentaro's heart had been beating hard for a while as he stared in front of him at the impending confrontation. Some time had already passed since the airdropped Gastrea had landed; they'd most likely started moving already. If they were planning a surprise attack on the back of the front lines, then they would soon come across each other.

Just then, there was a loud explosion behind them, followed by the sound of weapons firing. The main civil officer troops beyond the forest were finally fighting the Gastrea front lines head-on.

From between the treetops, Rentaro caught glimpses of explosions' red flames painting the battlefield crimson.

"Leader, I've found them!" Midori shouted toward him. Looking in the direction she was pointing, Rentaro, who couldn't see as well as she could in the dark, couldn't immediately tell what she was talking about.

He signaled Enju by tapping on her shoulder three times, and she used her rabbit jumping power to leap even higher. Rentaro gritted his teeth against the invisible hand that seemed to push down on him as they accelerated, until the pressure finally disappeared. With the sound of the wind in his ears, he opened his eyes narrowly and saw that they were already fifty meters in the air. Straining to look in the area where Midori had pointed earlier, he saw a pitch-black group, darker than the darkness, squirming in a clearing.

And a straight line from that was the main civil officer force led by Nagamasa Gado. There was no sign that the main force had noticed the impending danger

of the Gastrea sneaking in from behind them.

“We’re going down, Rentaro!” After Enju spoke, they lost inertia and traced the trajectory of a free fall. The forest rushed toward them at a terrifying speed and the fundamental fear of falling engraved in his DNA ran through his whole body. However, Enju safely thrust her legs at a thick branch, and with exquisite timing, bent her legs perfectly to break their fall and jump toward the next branch. Before they had time to relax, Rentaro gave the hand signal to attack to those behind him.

Everyone leapt off their branches.

This time, he could see the enemy even more clearly. Their chests were made up of eight parts, and a pair of antennae extended from their heads like whiskers; each antenna had a pair of small compound eyes. The hard exoskeletons, like those of crustaceans, glittered like obsidian. And there were a lot of them.

The Gastrea were shaped exactly like pill bugs, but in order to infect humans with their bodily fluids, their mouthparts were stretched wide and had giant fangs peeking out. They came up to about Rentaro’s chest, but because they did not have crazy shapes, Rentaro concluded that they were all Stage One simple factors.

The Gastrea crowded together in a diamond formation, but because they were so vigilantly waiting for a chance to launch a surprise attack on the main force, they had, luckily, still not noticed Rentaro and the others.

After a while, one dropped suddenly from the sky and screeched to the others upon spotting Rentaro’s crew, but by then it was too late.

Rentaro and Enju jumped into the middle of the Gastrea gaggle side by side. Just before they landed, Enju cut Rentaro loose, and Rentaro rolled forward to break his fall as he landed. Enju released her terrifying natural leg powers and darted around, obliterating the enemy’s admittedly crowded battle formation. Her hurricane roundhouse kick surpassed even the claws of a tiger, ripping through the armor of the crustaceans easily. With their exoskeletons peeled off, their bodily fluids spurted into the sky, and they were covered by the high-pitched screams of the Gastrea.

The Varanium weights on the bottoms of Enju's shoes drew out a strong and unparalleled kick that was like a flash of death for Gastrea.

They could not lose.

"Haaaaaaa!" Rentaro released his artificial limbs. The artificial skin covering his right arm peeled off, exposing his black Super-Varanium artificial arm. Gritting his teeth at the fuzzy pain burning into his brain, Rentaro made a fist and raised it, activating its power.

Empty golden shell casings were kicked out from his arm. At the same time, his arm was pushed forward with intense acceleration. He felt the thrust of *Homura Kasen* sink into the flesh of a Gastrea that weighed less than seventy kilograms. The next instant, it was thrown into the horizon like a bowling ball, impacting the surrounding Gastrea and scattering them like pins.

The Gastrea had been planning a surprise attack, but they had ended up on the receiving end of one, and it threw them into confusion.

The other members of Rentaro's adjuvant landed like shooting stars, crushing enemies left and right. Midori's nails sprinkled death before they could even be seen, and when the Gastrea tried to retreat, they were caught in invisible spider silk and exposed to the appalling slaughter of Tamaki's Varanium chain saw.

Soon, about thirty Gastrea had screamed and were starting to flee, succumbing to fear.

A violent urge filled Rentaro. He couldn't let them get away. Behind them spread the undefended Tokyo Area. If even one Gastrea created a Pandemic, it would be more than enough.

"Leave it to me." Just then, there was a hint of the smell of citrus shampoo right next to him. Kisara, with her long hair fluttering, danced out in front of Rentaro. Using her right foot as an axis, she rotated her body once, slipping her sword out of its sheath with centrifugal force. "Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing First Style, Number 8—" There was a ringing sound as the sword came out of the sheath. "*Muei Musou*."

The thirty Gastrea that had turned around and were starting to flee were suddenly cut in two, and there were screams and splashes of blood. In addition,

the trunks of the pine trees and sugar maples in the area were also cleaved in half, and all the trees within range of the attack were felled.

Rentaro stood still in amazement, forgetting for a moment that they were in the middle of battle. *A whirlwind slash.* It was the only way to describe that attack.

But just then, Rentaro was surprised as the skin of the Gastrea that had been cut down started to foam, and then started to stand, convulsing. Gastrea that had escaped damage to their hearts and brains were showing signs of regenerating.

“Kisara, get back!”

Realizing what Rentaro was trying to do, Kisara retreated.

Rentaro made eye contact with all the Promoters. Standing in a line horizontally, they drew their guns from their belts. The impact of the kickback reached Rentaro’s elbows and his eyes were dazzled by the muzzle fire that bloomed in the dark of the night. They pulled the trigger continuously without even checking to see where their shots landed.

Rentaro, Kisara, Shoma, and Tamaki fired with unwavering control, rushing into the bodies of the Gastrea that were trying to regenerate, and the Varanium’s regeneration-inhibiting properties started to work. The Gastrea trying to revive themselves were pierced with a storm of bullets, and this time, they stopped moving.

There was a strong smell of gun smoke from the muzzle of Rentaro’s XD that had emptied itself of ammunition. Rentaro changed magazines and waited for a while, but after realizing there was no sign of regeneration, he sighed.

They had defeated them all.

And because he thought that, when one of the bodies at Kisara’s feet suddenly jumped up and sprang at her, he wasn’t able to deal with it in time. “Kisara!” he shouted.

At his voice, a look of astonishment appeared on her face.

Just as the Gastrea’s fangs were about to pierce through Kisara’s skin, a fist

came from the side, twisting into its torso. The Gastrea that had been hit by the fist expanded suddenly and then burst, like a balloon that had been pricked with a needle.

A sullen mist of blood hung in the air, and Rentaro and Kisara stopped in their tracks, eyes wide. In the end, Shoma was the one who had saved her.

However, Kisara was so astonished that she even forgot to thank him. Abruptly, Rentaro's and Kisara's eyes met. Even without words, he could tell that she was asking, "What was that move just now?"—because Rentaro felt exactly the same way.

If she were just asking the name, he could have told her that it was *Rokuro Kabuto*, which drew a circle around the opponent as it was released, but that wasn't a move that made the opponent explode.

Shoma had improved on the move.

Seeing Rentaro's and Kisara's eyes on him, Shoma turned his body around awkwardly. It was as if he suddenly regretted using the move.

"Leader Satomi, we have finished here." Turning around, Rentaro was just in time to see Midori slipping her claws out of the last pill bug's body. She had skewered the brain easily through its armor by going through spaces between segments, and the light of life had already been extinguished in the Gastrea's eyes.

In the middle of a terrible battlefield filled with corpses, the four Initiators looked at him with their eyes shining red.

They killed them all in such a short time… Rentaro shivered. They were strong. This was the true value of the adjuvant system.

Rentaro returned to himself with a start when he realized they were all watching him, waiting for orders. "All right, now let's hurry up and go back and help the main force."

Rentaro and the others tried their best to move quietly as they hurried back. As he held onto Enju's shoulder, with her kicking trees and rustling leaves as she moved, for some reason, the uneasiness he felt showed no sign of going away.

It was true that they had nipped the surprise attack in the bud, but everything they had encountered so far was Stage Ones.

Where were the Stage Twos and higher?

Finally, they could hear the rapport of weapons and hardened voices beyond the trees, and see red through the leaves. Suddenly, the forest cleared, and his vision widened all at once. The rough voices that had been muffled by the trees became noticeably louder.

Because they had been in the dark until now, Rentaro involuntarily narrowed his eyes as light flowed into his retinas all at once. “Damn it, they’re already here…?”

They had only been away from the formation for a short time, but the battlefield had changed considerably. The battle formation that had been organized before had collapsed, and they had been pushed by the Gastrea all the way back to the tents. Flames were blazing here and there all over their own camp. A melee of enemy and ally mixed together; shouts and cries, guns and swords—the battlefield played the music of pandemonium.

An enormous, cylindrical Gastrea that looked like a snake but had a mouth like a sucker smashed the tents around it as it writhed; it was a leech Gastrea. Fighting more than equally with a pair that had swords in both hands was a Gastrea that looked like a strange combination of spider and scorpion—a pseudoscorpion Gastrea. There was a group of civil officers with spears who had gathered to form a line around a boar almost ten meters in length.

Pushed back by the fierce attacks, the civil officers fought hard within the camp, but no matter how Rentaro looked at it, there was too big of a difference in their numbers, and the civil officers were at a disadvantage. In this situation, it didn’t matter which squad they were in anymore.

In the back of his mind, Hidehiko Gado’s face looking at him with betrayal crossed his mind for a moment, and he shook his head. He had to at least try to find them. Rentaro signaled his team members to follow him and then ran like the wind through the battlefield. Fortunately, all the combatants were focused on their own bouts, so they were able to weave through the gaps as they ran.

Climbing the small hill in front of them, Rentaro suddenly found a shining, dark

gray exoskeleton and sighed with relief. There was no mistaking it. It was Hidehiko Gado.

In a spot a little ways away from the battlefield, not even giving any orders, he was wandering around idly.

“Hey, you. This place is done for. Give the order for the troops’ immediate retreat.” Rentaro started to stretch out his arm, but he noticed something strange and stopped his hand in midair.

“Well, if it isn’t Leader Satomi.” Hidehiko turned his pale face around to face Rentaro. Rentaro had always imagined that the man shut himself in a research lab all day, but at that moment he was more than pale; he was pallid. Even though he had been so nervous before the attack that even the roots of his teeth were shaking, right now, the man was strangely calm.

However, rather than putting Rentaro at ease, it seemed eerie. The problem was the object Hidehiko held in his right hand.

“Have you seen the Spear of Light?” Hidehiko asked.

“The Spear of Light?” Rentaro repeated.

Hidehiko chuckled. “If those guys have such a thing, then humans have no chance of winning in the first place. It’s over.” Saying that, he showed Rentaro the object he held in his hand.

Next to Rentaro, Enju took a sharp breath.

It was a human arm. It was a distorted cross section, as if it had been ripped off, and there was nothing past the elbow. From its size, it looked to be that of a young girl. It was probably his Initiator’s.

“Kokone and I were a real family. We said we would be together even until the end and held hands the whole time. That’s when we were attacked by the Spear of Light… Before I knew it, the spear went astray and came right next to me. Kokone disappeared, leaving only her arm.” One glance at Hidehiko laughing loudly, and Rentaro could tell that he was not in a normal state of mind. “But I’m glad that you’re okay, Leader Satomi.”

Seeing Hidehiko take a step as his armor creaked, Rentaro involuntarily took a

step back. In the end, that action decided their fate.

Suddenly, the ground started to crack beneath Hidehiko's feet, and there was a sudden bump, and it split in half with a roar.

"Look out!" Rentaro pulled so hard he thought his arm would be dislocated, and before he knew it, he had fallen on his back on the ground.

Where Hidehiko had been standing, about ten meters of the ground had completely fallen away, and there was a giant hole. Gado had disappeared.

Suddenly returning to his senses, Rentaro quickly took a flashlight from his hip and ran up to the hole. He covered his mouth to keep out the choking earth and its smoky cloud of dust. The second he shined the light on the bottom, however, he met the eyes of creatures. They'd dug their way out of the earth.

Except—to be more precise, their eyes had degenerated so much and were so small that they could no longer see. They had fur that looked like wet velvet. Their five gigantic claws that had become enlarged were for pushing through the dirt, but the feelers and bright red flower that broke through their fur gave off the stink of a Rafflesia plant. If they didn't have the feelers radiating out from the tips of their noses covering their faces, Rentaro probably never would have noticed that they were star-nosed mole Gastrea.

He had not expected this attack from directly below them at all, and it gave him the chills. They were probably Stage Twos. From what he could see, there were about five of them. They'd caused the cave-in and were coming to attack them.

When the moles realized they'd been seen, they quickly rushed into a side tunnel.

"Tinaaaaa!" Rentaro called out.

"Yes, sir!" Tina leapt and jumped down to the bottom of the hole and thrust the antitank rifle that was almost as big as she was into the side tunnel and pulled the trigger. There was a dull bang, and a great muzzle flash spouted out of the tip of the rifle from the V-shaped muzzle break. The discharge gas that flowed backward blew up a cloud of dust that covered the surrounding area. In an instant, there were screams of Gastrea coming from deep in the tunnel.

Without pausing to take a breath, Tina changed her aim and pulled the trigger again and again, mercilessly, until finally all the Gastrea were silent.

“Big Brother, I have defeated them,” she stated.

Nodding once at Tina, who had jumped out of the hole and returned to his side, Rentaro looked over the battlefield.

It had become a melee with no logic or reason. Once it had come to this, the commander’s instructions had no way of reaching them. On the other hand, he did not have the power or authority to do anything about their current battle.

Rentaro closed his eyes and then slowly opened them. “We will split up and help those civil officers who are fighting tough battles.” Everyone gave a nod. Rentaro closed his eyes and took three steadying breaths, then announced, “Let’s go.”

Promising to reunite, they bumped fists and split up by pair.

Rentaro ran along the battlefield, looking for civil officers who needed to be rescued. Enju was able to make enemies retreat and rescue their allies at what seemed like lightning speed. They rescued an Initiator who had been cornered by Gastrea and was desperately scooting backward to escape, then saved a pair that had lost their comrades, and carried out the wounded without a break.

Some of the people they saved were dumbfounded and stupefied, some repeated their thanks more than necessary, and some looked Rentaro in the eye and squeezed his hand, saying nothing as they returned to the battlefield.

However, as was natural on a battlefield where life and death competed with each other, they didn’t meet with just beautiful situations. Unfortunately, they were unable to make it in time to save an Initiator who they watched get ground up between numerous rows of sharpened teeth. In particular, their eyes were filled with the sight of confused Initiators who lost their Promoters, their commanders, and emotional pillars of support.

In one place, there was a girl sitting unmoving next to the corpse of her Promoter. When Rentaro pulled her arm to try to get her to a safe place, he was met with resistance.

“Stop,” said the girl. “If I leave this man’s side, I’ll be hit a lot.”

The words were an account of the kind of treatment she had received from her Promoter when he was still alive. No matter how many times Rentaro told her that her Promoter had died, the girl wouldn't believe it, and Rentaro left to rescue someone else. When he passed by that area again, a large number of Gastrea had swarmed over, devouring something greedily with their backs turned to him, looking like they were fighting over something in front of them. They seemed to notice Rentaro, but they showed no sign of coming to attack him. They must have really liked whatever they were eating there.

In another place, there was a Promoter who was turning into a Gastrea. He was aiming his gun so that he could at least die as a human, but an Initiator with her dyed hair in buns stood in his way, imploring him with tears in her eyes. "Shun, it's not too late. So don't kill yourself!"

The next instant, the transformation was complete, and the girl's head was plucked off by the Gastrea behind her. Her body fell, spinning like a top.

The smoke made Rentaro's eyes sting. His breathing became shallow. His face was probably black with soot and mud. The effective temperature was around a blistering 50 degrees Celsius. Rentaro ripped off his necktie at the battlefield's heat.

He had gotten separated from Enju without realizing it. When he looked around to see where he should go next, he saw a flame of fire approaching an abandoned cottage right next to him. The flames of the burning civil officer tents called to each other and merged. When they did, they transformed into an intense swirl of flame that reached over 2,100 degrees Celsius. The roar made by the surge of crimson was like the bellowing laugh of the devil.

If he remembered correctly, this building held gasoline—

The instant he saw the tongues of flame stretch to reach the drums, the blood in his entire body froze. The next moment, there was a burst of flame, and his body was hammered with the wind from the blast as it was thrown into the air. Rentaro was thrown almost twenty meters back, and his body was pushed into the ground. He rolled a few times with the momentum until he finally stopped.

There was damage to his inner ears. As his world turned, he spit out the gritty sand and put his hand on the ground, pushing up his hurting body. From his

scorched uniform came the stink of burning synthetic fibers. His clothes were ripped all over the place, and there were dark red spots of coagulated blood. He breathed in too much thin air and dizziness hit him like a tank. Ringing reverberated deep in his ears. Feeling strange, he put his hands over his ears and realized that he could no longer hear. Damage to his eardrums…

Rentaro stood, dazed, looking across the battlefield that had lost its sound.

Black smoke rose from the civil officer's base at the front lines, which was red with flames. Ashes danced in the air. The remaining officers were shouting desperately with their mouths wide open, trying to turn the tide in their favor, but their situation just kept getting worse. There was an Initiator with her arm around a Promoter without a head. She was looking desperately for a medic. A reptilian Gastrea threw an Initiator's body high into the sky, then, when it caught her in its mouth, it and another Gastrea ripped the body clean in half.

There was an Initiator who must have gotten separated from her Promoter. She had white skin and wore a white dress, and in the middle of the scorching battlefield, she covered her face with both hands, crying. At her feet, there were pieces of bodies mixed together that came all the way up to her ankles. The organs of the dead went flying, and opened-up craniums had brains showing as they rolled around covered in mud.

It was hell.

That was the only way to describe the scene unfolding before him.

"What are you doing, Rentaro?" Suddenly, he felt strong pressure on his head. Enju's voice and the sounds of the battlefield returned to his ears. "It's coming this way! Get down."

"What do you mean by *it*?" Before he could even finish those words, it suddenly happened.

Far off in the distance, beyond the curtain of fire, he thought he saw a brief flash, and something that looked like a beam of light mowed down an area right above where Rentaro was, moving at the speed of light. The next instant, everything that was in that silver path had been cut, and with a strange sound, ten or so civil officers were split in two, their bodies dancing in the air.

Chills went down his spine. Standing up reflexively and looking behind him, Rentaro could see those silver paths cutting through, with frantic screams one after another.

Spears of Light—Those three words appeared inside his head.

“No way…” Rentaro took a step back in shock.

The anti-Gastrea tactics they had developed in these past ten years had been made on the assumption that Gastrea did not use projectile weapons. That assumption was crumbling from its base. This was probably the thing that had shot down the Tomahawk missiles fired by the aegis cruiser the other day and brought down the helicopter and fighter aircraft.

His instinct told him that they could not win. They were all going to be killed. Rentaro himself, Enju, Kisara, Tina, and all their other adjuvant members would be killed for no good reason.

At that moment, a long roar echoed across the battlefield. This roar reached from one end of the forty districts to the other. The roar that sounded like distant thunder was not a war cry or a shriek, but a scream of agony.

All the Gastrea froze at once and turned their heads toward the roar. After a brief moment, the sound disappeared from the battlefield.

Rentaro also followed their gazes, looking in the same direction. He saw an enormous silhouette that looked like a small mountain twisting its body in agony. It was obviously tens of times bigger than the other Gastrea.

Rentaro knew instinctively that that was Aldebaran.

On the heels of that thought, the Gastrea moved as one. Caterpillar Gastrea crawled along the ground, and insect and bird Gastrea all hung in the air around the enormous one, using their own bodies as a wall to retreat.

Because of the Gastrea flying like a defensive mosquito swarm around Aldebaran, even if Rentaro strained his eyes, he could not see what the Gastrea in the middle looked like. However, the hoarse scream he heard for a moment and the excessively large silhouette were more than enough to send shivers up and down his body.

Finally, all the Gastrea had left the battlefield, and all that was left were the living and the dead.

“Have we been…saved?” The small Promoter next to him muttered this quietly, but it echoed in Rentaro’s ears for a long time.

2

The next day, a black rain poured down on Tokyo Area. The torrential rains drenched Rentaro’s whole body and dripped from the bottom of his chin. He thought about the temperature being 15 degrees Celsius in July and found it hard to believe how cold it was.

However, that was only to be expected. When Rentaro raised his face, he saw a dark, lead-colored sky.

The day before, the enormous Varanium structure, the Monolith, had collapsed. The seriousness of the effects had become clear after a night passed. On the news Rentaro watched in the morning, he learned that when the Monolith collapsed, a large amount of ash from the Monolith had drifted up into the stratosphere and formed a thick cloud. It blocked the sun and looked like it would remain in the sky above Tokyo Area for three days.

The sound of the Monolith’s collapse had been heard even at the edge of Tokyo, and the vibrations from the collapse were felt all across Japan, reaching even Hakata and Hokkaido Areas. The shock wave from the collapse went halfway around the world and was even seen at the weather observatory at Pike’s Peak in Colorado, USA. On a global scale, there was a 0.3 hectopascal rise in atmospheric pressure measured. Based on recent weather observation models, the ashes and sand from the bleached Monolith were carried north by the westerlies and were expected to fall as far north as Hokkaido.

Even the black rain that drenched Rentaro’s body right now was apparently from the ash and sand from the Monolith’s collapse that had been dissolved by the rain and were now falling back down. From the announcement made by the government, there was nothing harmful in it, but he could not tell if that was the

truth or not. At the very least, he did not try to whet his thirst with it.

Even more serious was that for the next three days, the sun would not peek out onto the surface of the earth. There was already a gloomy, defeated mood spreading through the civil officer troops who had survived the hell from last night. If at least the weather changed for the better, their moods could be changed so too, thanks to the secretion of serotonin in their brains, but…

The bottoms of their boots were filled with mud, and it felt very uncomfortable.

Rentaro lifted his head and looked around him. The surrounding area was a wide, vast plain, and Promoters were spread out. There was a mountain nearby of raised ground with one side covered with debris, telling the story of how intense the battle had been between the Gastrea and the self-defense force.

Rentaro was walking where the infantry division of the SDF had made camp.

He was sandwiched between body bags for some reason. This morning, only the Promoters were gathered under the pretext of searching for survivors and rescuing those in the base camp.

Everyone had noticed that it was just a pretext to conceal the real reason they were here.

The SDF facilities they were visiting were destroyed, and its officials were mainly lying around in a state where they did not need rescuing. The fact that the Aldebaran army had flooded the civil officer rear guard meant that the fate of the self-defense force that had been the front guard had already been decided, but it was still a shock to see it with his own eyes. They had been completely wiped out by Aldebaran first, after all.

They could not come to an agreement with the Gastrea or take prisoners of war, so once they started fighting, it inevitably became a war of extermination. Thanks to that, there wasn’t really anyone in need of rescue. It was reasonable to assume that most of those who were not here had become Gastrea themselves.

Apparently, the goal given to Rentaro and the other Promoters was to retrieve the corpses before they rotted and spread serious infectious diseases, as well as

to send them back to their bereaved families. Rentaro thanked them silently as he tried to gather as many of the parts of the corpses as he could and put them into the body bags one by one. Nevertheless, part of his brain was still stuck on asking why this had happened.

There had been two battles in Kanto already. In the First Kanto Battle, the self-defense force suffered a defeat. In the Second Kanto Battle, the self-defense force had won. During the Second Kanto Battle, the SDF had come up with a strategy to force the Gastrea out and keep them out, so they were confident that they would be able to win the third battle as well. It was hard to believe that they had been defeated so easily this time.

Just what was the difference between the last battle and this one? If they could not determine the cause of the self-defense force's defeat, there was no way they'd find the clues needed to help them defeat the Gastrea. Moved by instinct that was close to conviction, Rentaro walked around the remains of the battlefield in search of his clue.

Before long, he came across one strange thing after another. A tank was split completely in two. From the sharp cut on it, he thought that it was probably from the Spear of Light. There were also those that had fallen into holes and couldn't move. Taking a quick look around, he saw that there were self-propelled guns and missile silos that were also in the same situation.

This was probably the work of the Model Mole—the mole Gastrea that Rentaro had also encountered. They dug tunnels until they were right under the weapons of the main force and then scraped away at the dirt to make a hole, inducing the ceiling of the tunnel to cave in. No matter how good the tank treads were on bad roads, they did not appear to be able to get out of deep pitfalls.

Rentaro's feelings had surpassed fear and had turned into admiration for their superb strategy. With their sniping, the moles had even brought down the general, Hidehiko Gado, in front of Rentaro's very eyes.

No matter how Rentaro looked at it, they were being led way too well. They were like a single colony of insects. How in the world were they sharing information?

Just then, he felt a prickle in his mind. *That's right, I had thought about this*

possibility before. If he remembered correctly, that time, he thought they looked like a school of fish that gathered together to look like one giant fish. Suddenly, in the back of his mind, this image overlapped with the image of Aldebaran retreating with its subordinates circling around it like a swarm of mosquitos.

A lightbulb flashed in his head and Rentaro involuntarily raised his voice. *Could that be what it was?* If that was the case, then Aldebaran's real ability was—

"Man, this is terrible." There was a splash, and Rentaro turned his head to see Tamaki Katagiri standing with a grim look on his face. His dark blond hair had gotten darker after being in the black rain, and his face, under his sunglasses, was somber.

Rentaro made a sound of agreement and turned to Tamaki. "Speaking of which, I haven't thanked you for your help yet."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"With Kisara."

Tamaki seemed to understand and looked around them, saying, "Sure."

Rentaro followed Tamaki's gaze and saw all the Promoters moving slowly, putting the corpses in the body bags. As a Promoter, Kisara should have also been called for this work, but after talking to the higher-ups about it, he convinced Kisara not to go, saying it wasn't something a girl should be doing.

Kisara put up a fight, but Tamaki helped Rentaro try to convince her, and they somehow settled the matter without incident.

Kisara had said, "What, both of you?" sulkily, but after seeing this scene with human body parts scattered all over the place, he confirmed that his judgment was correct.

Tamaki shrugged his shoulders. "It's not like I did it for you. I did it for her."

Just then, there was a noise from far away that split the air, and they lifted their faces.

Rentaro had heard this noise before. It was a helicopter rotor. Looking in the direction Tamaki was pointing, he saw a helicopter the size of a bean growing larger and larger. Rentaro saw the logo of the news company on the side of the

helicopter and got a bad feeling.

Looking around, he saw that other civil officers had also stopped working and had turned their faces to the sky.

The helicopter passed over Rentaro's head with a roar that made him want to cover his ears. He couldn't hear very well with the sound of the rain and the rotor, but a sliding door opened and a reporter shouted something. He could predict what the reporter was saying.

In the first place, humans liked news where they could laugh about others' mistakes more than they liked news about others doing heroic things. What did the organization that was optimized for getting ratings have to say to the civil officers who couldn't even be said to have won an easy victory if they were being nice…?

Rentaro gritted his teeth. *Damn it, are they here to publicly scorn us?* Suddenly, Rentaro was surprised by an explosion at his ear and a roar that moved upward at the same time. Covering his ears and looking next to him, he saw Tamaki looking up with white smoke rising from the muzzle of his Magnum revolver.

Rentaro then heard the hoarse scream of the reporter in the helicopter. Apparently, the bullet had hit inside the helicopter, and the helicopter made a sharp turn and turned tail.

"Shit! In movies, handguns could make military helicopters blow up, but it doesn't work like that in real life, I guess?" Tamaki muttered.

"You were trying to blow it up?" Rentaro was dumbfounded for a moment, but when his shock subsided, a smile rose to his face.

The civil officers working around them laughed pleasantly and cheered, and that slowly grew louder. Rentaro realized that the stagnant mood that had been on the battlefield had been driven off for a moment, and looked with wonder at Promoter Tamaki Katagiri.

In the end, the Promoters rescued sixty-eight survivors in half a day. Thinking about the fact that the self-defense force's infantry was a large force that had more than seven thousand people in it, this was only a hundredth of them, which was a depressingly low number. The injured were immediately brought to the medical squad. Those who were crying and had lost their will to fight from fear of Gastrea were deemed unable to withstand more battle, and were given similar treatment.

They were currently hearing what had happened from the survivors, but Rentaro wouldn't hear anything from his lowly place on the totem pole, so he could only imagine what they were saying.

After a while, the black rain stopped, and when it grew dark, they used that as a chance to end the search. They kept trying until the very end, so even though they didn't have any proof, they were able to feel pretty confident that they had picked up all the survivors.

They returned, completely exhausted, to a town close to the plain. The towns in the Outer Districts had been abandoned for ten years and were growing wild, overrun with trees and grass, with plants budding from their roofs. The plants had grown bigger due to the Gastrea virus, and some were swallowing up whole houses with their massive roots.

Tokyo Area, District 40, the Outer District where Rentaro and the others were fighting, had plateaus and steep slopes extending far into the area, so few people lived there. As such, there was little chance of coming across Manhole Children or people living illegally in the ruins, so the civil officer troops, who had lost their base to the Gastrea attack, requisitioned these buildings.

Fundamentally, the buildings in the Outer Districts were exposed to remarkable aging the moment people stopped living in them and heating them, as they went through differences in temperature and expanded and contracted over and over. The government did not recommend living in the Outer District buildings that could collapse at any moment, but everyone was tired of exposing their skin to the black rain that had been falling since morning, so there were no objections.

There were many different buildings of various sizes in the town, but only

about a tenth had the minimum facilities to protect them from the rain and keep them warm. Peeking through a convenience store window whose glass had been shattered to pieces, Rentaro was very surprised to see a goat that had gone wild sprawled between the product shelves. The park he stopped by on the way back had an abandoned tricycle and a flattened soccer ball being blown drearily by in the wind. The letters on a rotting signboard with red rust making it thicker could only be half-read from the stains and peeling.

Even on the day it started being evacuated as a Gastrea danger zone, the residents must have thought they could return in two or three days. The whole town still looked as if time had stopped on that day ten years ago, with traces of the residents' lives over everything.

Rentaro was heading toward a certain junior high school deep within the town. Faint light leaked from the gym that was connected to it. If he remembered correctly, this was where Kisara and the others were working. Thinking that, he diffidently opened the emergency exit door with a loud creak. When he did so, the noise that had been absorbed by the walls rushed at him. There was the sound of people groaning and sobbing mixed with other unintelligible screams, with the sound of slippers running on top of all of that.

Inside the building, it was like a field hospital. Injured civil officers and self-defense force troops lay on beds and futons, and when there weren't enough, on rush and straw mats. Between them, volunteer doctors and nurses in white coats hurried back and forth. It was so loud that one had to yell in order to be heard by the person next to him or her, and the smell of medicine wafting through the building was so strong it made Rentaro's head hurt.

Because they had no electricity, there were lanterns and candles all over the place, with electric lights tied on top of generators used in place of the normal lights, so the whole place was dimly lit, and there was a strange mood in the air that was hard to explain.

"Oh, Rentaro, Rentaro, Rentaro!" An especially loud voice called out, and he saw Enju waving an arm above her head as she ran toward him. With a thud, Enju's head rushed into him and a soft weight rested on his chest. Hugging Enju to him, he noticed a pink nurse's cap on top of her head.

When Rentaro pointed at it, Enju lifted her face as usual and laughed gleefully. “Isn’t it cute? They gave it to me since I was helping. They said workers had to wear this.”

“I-I see…,” said Rentaro.

Enju tilted her head slightly. “What’s wrong, Rentaro?”

“Nothing—”

“Oh, Satomi, you’re back early.” Turning around, he saw Kisara holding a washbasin with hot water in it. She also had a nurse’s cap on her head, like Enju. “Our shift is almost over, so please wait a bit.”

Rentaro looked around at the bustling atmosphere before looking back at Kisara. “Even Enju’s here. She’s not being a bother?”

Kisara smiled and shook her head. “Not at all. Enju’s a big help, holding the injured people’s hands tight and just being with them. Everyone seems to appreciate her. On the other hand, I can only do random chores, so I’m sure I’m more in the way of the doctors and nurses.”

Enju stuck out her chest proudly and sniffed. “You see? I am being of help.”

Rentaro watched Enju silently. It was possible that Enju was recovering from the painful incident of her classmates being killed in a bombing. He had the urge to ask her directly, but considering the possibility that he was stirring up a hornet’s nest, he could not speak carelessly. Rentaro hid his inner turmoil and patted Enju on the head, as if going through his usual movements, saying, “Yes, yes, good job,” pretending to act normally. Enju did not seem to notice.

“By the way, Satomi, have you met up with Dr. Sumire already?” Kisara asked.

“What? Doc? Doc’s here, too?”

Just then, Rentaro felt a weight on his shoulders as someone draped their arms over him from behind. Cold skin like a corpse. Said person put lips close to his ears. “Good evening, Satomi. It’s a nice night.”

“Gah!” Jumping away quickly and turning around, he saw a smiling face shining brightly with enjoyment through a curtain of hair that was left to grow as it pleased.

Dragging a long white lab coat, the coroner, Sumire Muroto, lifted her hand in casual greeting. “Yo,” she said. “I had some free time, so I left my basement room. The outside is nice sometimes, too.”

Rentaro’s mouth gaped in amazement, and he was unable to respond for a while. “Doc… Why are you here?”

“There was a request, so I came here today to supervise the doctors. Didn’t I tell you before? I’m a genius, so I have knowledge of everything. I’m just a coroner because it matches up with my hobby. In times of emergency like this, I get called in as a doctor, too.”

“So even Dr. Death saves people’s lives once in a while?”

“What, do you want to be euthanized, Rentaro?”

“I-I was just kidding. Don’t get mad, Doc.” Just then, a question crossed his mind. “Doc, didn’t you win a lottery ticket for the shelter? Why are you here?”

“I didn’t win it. I was given it. A government official came to my lab and said they couldn’t let Japan’s greatest mind die and gave me a ticket. I politely ripped it in half and threw it away then and there, though.”

“Huh?”

The corners of Sumire’s mouth lifted as she grinned. “What? Is that strange?”

“No… But if you’re going to rip it in half, then at least give it to someone.”

“Who would I give it to? Even if you had a single cup of water in the desert, it won’t do you much good, will it? At most, people will just start killing each other over the water. It’s more compassionate to resolutely throw the water onto the bare ground in this case.”

Rentaro paused. “Then, what fundamental solution would you propose for the lack of water?”

“Find a giant oasis that can quench everyone’s thirst, or get out of the desert. But looking at Tokyo Area’s current evacuation situation, I don’t see how we can find an oasis big enough to quench everyone’s thirst. I came here because I wanted to support the idiots who are carrying out the idiotic plan to get out of the desert.”

“Just so you know, once the Gastrea rush into this place, you won’t be able to run away.”

“I understand completely.”

“Doc, I thought you were a more logical person.”

Sumire grinned again. “Humans think about things logically and then move because of their emotions. I am the same. Keep moving, Rentaro. If you stop, death will catch up to you.”

“You’re right… Thanks, Doc.” Rentaro suddenly remembered something and asked her about Enju behind him in a low voice. “Doc, did you hear about Enju?”

Sumire’s eyes narrowed, and her expression grew stern for an instant. “Yeah, I did. Her classmates were killed because of all that uproar, right? It was very unfortunate.”

“Doc, how does Enju look to your professional eyes?”

“Don’t worry, she’s probably already fine.”

“What?” Rentaro’s mouth dropped open, stunned speechless.

“Enju has more mental strength than we think she has.”

“R-really?”

“You’re a really suspicious guy, aren’t you? Well, it might be that with the immediate danger of the Gastrea, she’s just not thinking about the bombing incident. Just in case, don’t say anything to her that might make her remember the incident.”

His strength suddenly left him in relief. It was all just his needless worrying. At the same time, he became embarrassed by all the nervous actions he took around Enju.

Sumire nodded in satisfaction and looked back at Enju and Kisara, clapping her hands. “Now, you two don’t need to help anymore, so go home and rest.”

“What will you do, Dr. Sumire?” Kisara asked wonderingly.

Sumire stuffed both hands into the pockets of her lab coat and smiled. “I will spend the night here. I’m going to do my own job. It’s better than you’d expect.

It’s the perfect dimness with a nice atmosphere thanks to all the candles reminding us to slow down and reflect. On top of that, the groans of the patients around me make me feel like I’m in the middle of a zombie movie. Thanks to that, I feel like I’ll have some wonderful nightmares.”

After waiting outside the gym for a while, Enju and Kisara came outside. Rentaro accompanied the girls, walking streets wet with rain. Following the shining GPS dot sent from Shoma’s cell phone, they headed toward the place supposedly secured for them to spend the night. When he finally raised his face, Rentaro found a ruin standing in the middle of a thick forest. It was called Century Heights Hotel.

“Is this the place, Rentaro?” Enju asked him.

“Yeah… At least, it’s supposed to be,” he replied.

“I don’t like it. It’s kind of creepy,” said Kisara.

Rentaro couldn’t help but agree with Kisara’s opinion. He lifted the flashlight and shined it on the unfinished woodwork of the building; the place looked like a haunted house.

There was ivy growing over the edifices, and the place looked like it had sports facilities, including a pool and tennis court. It looked like it was trying to be an all-in-one leisure facility, but that resulted in an air that smacked of identity confusion. Picking up a pamphlet that had fallen on the ground, he was surprised to find that one could even hold weddings here, once upon a time.

“This plateau breeze will make your life more sophisticated.” The aesthetic sense of that catchphrase seemed to go beyond a strained laugh and gave him the shivers instead.

Rentaro and the others carefully picked their way through the entrance, where the ceiling had already collapsed.

“Oh, Big Brother. Welcome.” Wearing an apron over her clothes, Tina had a candlestick in one hand and a feather duster in the other and was running toward him noisily. “I cleaned this hotel so that we can live in it.”

Rentaro saw that the dust on the ground had been swept, and the broken glass in the windows had been removed, so it felt quite clean. “Well…even if you

say we're going to live in it, we're just borrowing it for a few days."

"Even so, if we have to stay here anyway, doesn't it make you happier if it's clean?" Tina's eyes were sparkling. She looked like a child who had made a secret hideout.

When she led them to a Western-style dining room, they were met with an unexpected warmth. There was a long table with benches and a redbrick fireplace with brightly burning flames. Shoma, Midori, Tamaki, and Yuzuki had been preparing a meal and were just about to finish. There was a wood-chopping ax on the side, meaning someone had split apart the extra chairs and turned them into firewood.

Thinking about it sensibly, it did not seem to make sense that they would need to use the fireplace in the middle of summer, but after the ashes from the Monolith covered the sky, the temperature dropped suddenly, and to Rentaro, the warmth from the fireplace felt just right.

When preparations for the meal were completed, they didn't need to be ordered to sit and eat. The stew piled on plates and bowls smelled sweet, and when Rentaro brought it to his mouth hesitantly, his eyes widened in surprise. "This is good…" It was a little salty, but they probably thought that on a battlefield, it was better to have strong-tasting foods. It was hard to believe that these were made from canned rations and ready-made food packages.

"Hah, how about it? What do you think of me now?" It was Tamaki, who sounded proud as he rubbed his nose.

"You made this?" Rentaro asked.

Yuzuki answered, challenging but triumphant. "My big brother's the chef at home. A perv like you couldn't even come close to his skill."

Rentaro crossed his arms. This was exactly what was meant by "You can't judge a book by its cover." He felt the call of rivalry stir at the idea of another cook.

Once the meal was devoured, they were filled with a languid satisfaction. It wasn't that there was a lot of food. In fact, since their storehouse had burned down in yesterday's fighting, the amount of food they'd been given wasn't

enough to match the needs of all the civil officers who were left. If operations in Tokyo Area hadn't been frozen, they'd have promptly received relief supplies, but right now, those prospects were dim. Even so, the sense of relief they felt that all eight of them had survived the battlefield and were able to share another meal together overrode the physical shortage of food and gave them comfort.

Midori and Tina brought coffee out unstably after the meal, and after that, they all chatted pleasantly. At first glance, it looked peaceful, but Rentaro noticed some awkwardness mixed into their conversation. If he had to say, it felt like they were choosing words in such a way that the critical points of their conversation were not meshing.

But at that moment, Enju's innocent voice interrupted without sensing the mood. "Rentaro, why did Aldebaran run away?"

"There are rumors flying among the ranks of civil officers," Rentaro started. "But no one knows the real reason why…"

"Oh, is that so?" Enju made a serious face and crossed her arms. However, she seemed to think of a different question and murmured, "Will the Gastrea attack us again?"

Everyone stopped suddenly and looked down. The light of the candles in the three-pronged brass candlestick flickered ominously. It was the question no one had dared to ask until now.

Everyone had already lost too much. For Rentaro, he had studied how tragic war was time and time again in class. However, what he experienced after actually being thrown into the middle of a battlefield was a hell that destroyed the clichéd view of war he had a hundred times over. That battlefield, filled with screams that made his hair stand on end and dyed red with blood and guts, had opened up the lid to his sealed-off trauma and overlapped with images of the Gastrea War he had seen as a child.

Honestly, Rentaro had avoided taking the initiative to start this conversation. However, if they continued to keep their mouths shut and avert their eyes from reality, it would result in a grave miscalculation of their chance at survival.

When Rentaro looked up, he focused on Enju. "Well, we still have three days. I can't really say anything for sure."

In the original scenario of the Monolith's collapse, the Monolith was predicted to collapse seven days after Aldebaran injected it with Varanium corrosion fluid, and three days later, the replacement Monolith would be completed. However, because the Monolith had collapsed a day early, and they had already started fighting, even after a night had already passed they were still three days away from the arrival of the replacement Monolith. And it would be expecting too much to think that Aldebaran would not come back in the next three days.

"Satomi, wait…" Kisara raised her hand timidly. "About the Spear of Light…"

At those words, everyone's faces clouded over with disgust. Everyone had had a hard time dealing with it on the battlefield. If Enju hadn't saved Rentaro in the nick of time, he might not have been able to remain in this world.

"What *was* that, anyway, Kisara? Was it some sort of laser weapon or something?" That was the conclusion Rentaro had reached after thinking about it for a night.

It was the work of a moment, but the instant anything touched the silver thread that looked like a wire saw, every object in its path seemed to be chopped up in a second.

Kinetic bombardment—if it was like a bullet, tank gun, or particle beam, then it seemed like it would cause even worse damage than just blow things away around it. In the first place, if there were Gastrea that could shoot lasers, they would be an unbelievable threat.

However, Kisara shook her head quietly. "After spending the day helping the medical squad, I saw those who had their limbs cut off by the Spear of Light. All of them had various symptoms like deafness, loss of peripheral vision, and trembling." Kisara stopped talking for a moment and stared at Rentaro. "Satomi, don't you realize? These are all symptoms of a disease we learned about in Japanese history—Minamata disease."

Rentaro put his chin on his hand. If he remembered correctly, Minamata disease was a pollution-induced illness caused by the intake of methyl mercury concentrated in the bodies of seafood. Once he got that far, he stood from his chair without thinking. "Wait a minute, then Kisara, that means…"

Kisara shifted in her chair and looked straight at Rentaro. "Dr. Sumire, who

examined the corpses, said the Spear of Light that severed everything was probably compressed mercury."

"Mercury…" The other members of the adjuvant were also unsettled and couldn't hide it, murmuring unanimously.

Rentaro continued forward with his calm calculations. If that was the case, then somewhere, there was a Gastrea that could compress mercury inside its body and fire it.

"Big Brother, there is something I would like to report regarding that," said Tina.

"Tina, don't tell me you…"

Tina nodded once and released a Bit from her sleeve into the air. It silently floated in the air and circled around their heads. "After we split up, I saw the Spear of Light as I fought. At the time, I immediately shot out Shenfield to capture the Gastrea that fired it, but unfortunately, it was five kilometers away and so my rifle couldn't reach it."

"Five kilometers away?!" It fired at their camp from *that* far away? "What kind of Gastrea was it?" he asked, hoping against hope that she had seen.

However, Tina shook her head hard. "I'm sorry, Big Brother. Because Shenfield puts a large strain on my brain, it doesn't have the ability to send images. All I know are things like the distance, wind speed, and coordinates. However—" Tina beckoned the patrolling Shenfield to return and held it in both hands, staring hard at it. "It is quite large. It's about ten meters high; its length and width is also about ten meters. It's probably a Stage Four."

That was the thing that wreaked havoc on the civil officer base. They had no hope of winning unless they eliminated it. But how were they supposed to do that…?

Just then, a loud voice called "Excuse me!" from outside the door. When Rentaro stood to look out the window, he saw a man he didn't know standing outside. "Is there a Leader Satomi here? I have a summons from Commander Gado. Please report immediately to the temporary headquarters."

4

Rentaro left the dilapidated hotel looking sidelong at Enju and the others, who were watching uneasily. He followed Gado's messenger to the temporary headquarters; he had heard that it was in the main school building of a different junior high, and this was his first time visiting it.

The campfires he saw from afar grew steadily bigger, and the half-dilapidated school appeared slowly out of the darkness. After a quick, silent bow to the two guards standing in front of the campfires there to burn away the summer insects, they entered the school building.

From the direction the messenger was leading him, Rentaro surmised that Gado and the others were using the staff room as their temporary headquarters. From the light spilling out beyond the room, it looked as though they'd given top priority to acquiring electricity. Once Rentaro was delivered, Gado's messenger bowed shortly and left.

Rentaro knocked on the door and waited until he was given verbal permission to enter. At the voice, he slid open the door.

Having grown used to the darkness, the brightness inside dazzled his eyes. The extra steel tables in the staff room were pushed to the corner, and Gado and the twelve or so members of his adjuvant sat around a U-shaped table. In the center was a single, high-backed chair. Everyone around the table was wearing exoskeletons that looked like traditional Japanese armor, and the heat they emitted made the room feel cramped. It was as if they were about to start an inquiry.

Rentaro licked his upper lip and told himself to be careful. From the tense atmosphere and hostile gazes, Rentaro guessed that they weren't about to talk about something fun.

"Sit down," urged the bald Gado, with his goatee and red armor, from the seat at the head of the table. Cautiously, Rentaro did as he was told.

But Rentaro's eyes widened the moment he faced front and focused on Gado. Trying desperately to stifle his uneasiness inside, Rentaro nervously raised his arm and pointed at Gado. "You're…"

“Yeah, it happened when I fought Him.” There was nothing below Gado’s left thigh. It looked like it had been cut off, stitched up, and covered with a bandage. The bandage was covered with a dark stain of blood.

“By *him*, you mean…Aldebaran?” That instant, it was as if he had said an abominable name, and Gado’s team covered their faces in agitation.

The rumor was true then, after all. In yesterday’s battle, there was a scream of agony that echoed right before the civil officers were completely wiped out, and then the Gastrea suddenly retreated. Rentaro and the other regulars hadn’t been told the details, but it was a badly kept secret that Gado and his partner had fought Aldebaran, and that their fight had ended in a draw.

What was baffling about the situation was that Gado had gone into hiding with no explanation after that, but seeing the sorry state he was in now, Rentaro understood why. It was beyond the level of a badge of honor. If Gado showed himself to the civil officer troops the way he looked now, they couldn’t avoid a drop in morale.

Gado seemed to notice Rentaro’s silence and showed his white teeth with a sinister challenge, slapping his left knee. “You know, this leg wasn’t stolen from me. I gave it to that damn Gastrea.”

“Nagamasa, sir, please do not push yourself.” The quiet Initiator wearing a sky blue exoskeleton, Asaka Mibu, bravely waited upon him, trying to replace his leg.

But Gado waved her away, annoyed, and looked at Rentaro. “What was Hidehiko like in the end?”

“He fought gallantly, sir,” Rentaro answered.

Gado sighed deeply. “I was the one who forced him to give up being an artist and become a civil officer… If I had known this would happen, I would have let him do as he liked.”

Rentaro looked at the faces of everyone gathered there. “Did you fight against Aldebaran with everyone here?”

“No, Asaka and I were the only ones who made it past the enemy’s close battle formation. The enemy did a good job leading us by the nose with its splendid movements. Ironically, even though we can understand words, the enemy was a

much better commander.”

“What if there was a rational explanation for why the enemy could command troops?”

“What do you mean?”

“Gado. Aldebaran’s base is probably a bee Gastrea.”

This time, all of Gado’s adjuvant stirred with astonishment, and Gado looked dubious. “What are you talking about…?”

“Gado, do you know why the self-defense force that had an easy victory during the Second Kanto Battle was beaten so quickly this time in the Third Kanto Battle? Also, when you wounded Aldebaran, the surrounding Gastrea immediately formed a wall around it to protect it and retreated. Isn’t that strange if you think about it?”

Gado rubbed his bald head and tilted it. “Get to the point. Are you saying you found the answer?”

“Pheromones.”

“Pheromones…? Are you talking about those things that come out of your body to attract the opposite sex?”

“Those are sex pheromones. What made them all gather immediately to protect Aldebaran were probably swarm pheromones. It is said that swarm pheromones are what command a school of fish in the water to make them seem like one giant fish. There are also alarm pheromones, pheromones to tell friend from foe, pheromones to change moods, trail pheromones, and other different kinds. Over one thousand, six hundred have been identified.

“Aldebaran manipulated mole Gastrea to efficiently stop weapons like tanks and automatic cannons from underground, and had dragonfly Gastrea drop others for a surprise attack to break through the rear. From the timing to everything else, it’s too perfect. Aldebaran is probably able to use known and unknown pheromones to command the Gastrea.

“Pheromones have no taste or smell, so normal humans definitely cannot sense them, and if Aldebaran can use pheromones so dexterously, then it has to

be a bee or some other kind of similar Gastrea. Gado, you saw Aldebaran, right? Did you see degenerated wings or a stinger somewhere on its body?”

Gado, lost in thought, didn’t answer as he put a hand on his chin.

It looked like Rentaro had hit the nail on the head. “Do you understand what this means? It means if we take down the head, Aldebaran, the whole swarm will fall apart. Gastrea working alone won’t have a leader anymore and can be easily routed. If we continue to get rid of them, they will suffer an upset before long. There’s no need to chase after them. Eventually, the replacement Monolith will arrive. We’ll win.”

However, even after listening to Rentaro’s plan for victory, Gado remained silent with his arms crossed. Eventually, he put his elbow on top of the desk and put his chin on his hand, looking at Rentaro listlessly. “Your opinion was very helpful. Then, I will share with you a piece of information that you don’t know. About none other than Aldebaran—”

“Commander!” A member of the adjuvant stood up with a screech of his chair. It was a middle-aged man whose face looked oddly similar to Gado’s. He had been part of Gado’s son Hidehiko’s adjuvant. It was possible that all the members of Gado’s adjuvant were his own blood relatives. “I must oppose this! If that is leaked, there will be a fatal drop in morale. You have no obligation to tell a mere soldier!”

Gado shook his head. “It’s not a problem. Leader Satomi’s IP rank is 300. He has the highest rank out of everyone in the troop besides me. He has the right to know. If there’s trouble from it, I will be held responsible.” Saying that, Gado looked back at Rentaro and said gravely, “Leader Satomi, Aldebaran is an immortal Gastrea. There’s no way to kill it.”

“Huh?” Rentaro responded stupidly. He thought he must have heard wrong. However, that faint hope was crushed to smithereens the next moment.

“I will say it again, Leader Satomi. Aldebaran is an immortal Gastrea. Last night, I got in close to him, ready to cross swords and cut off his head. With this,” Gado said as he had Asaka go get the weapon leaning against the wall.

The weapon Asaka reverently brought back was a giant weapon about as big as she was. Two black blades came from the hilt. It was a special sword called a

twin sword.

“My sword split open the Gastrea’s head, no mistake, and pierced its chest with its next stroke. I definitely felt like I had done damage to its brain and heart, but that thing didn’t fall, and the next instant, its wounds started to heal, albeit slowly. I was extremely confused and left myself open. Thanks to that, my leg was eaten, and now look at me.”

“No way. That’s impossible…,” Rentaro said. Gastrea only had two vital spots —the brain and the heart. These two areas were supposed to be virtually impossible to regenerate, and other than stabbing these areas and defeating them, using Varanium weapons that inhibit regeneration to inflict damage was the main tactic used when fighting against Gastrea.

Gado’s sword, with its twin obsidian edges, was without a doubt made of Varanium. Damage to the brain and heart, plus the fact that these attacks were made by the regeneration-inhibiting Varanium, should have made triply sure to give Aldebaran a prompt death. To be able to heal wounds like that was extremely unusual.

Gado shrugged his shoulders. “Gastrea cells repair and regenerate telomeres, so they never die of old age. In other words, rather than being immortal, it would be more accurate to say Aldebaran will not age or die.”

Will not age or die…

The back of Rentaro’s mind was numb, and he did not know what to say. The darkness of despair pushed in and enveloped Rentaro from all sides. He had thought that Aldebaran’s ability was just the Varanium corrosion liquid and using pheromones to completely control a troop of Gastrea, but he had been jumping to conclusions thinking he knew the truth behind the ghost.

There had been one more ability.

Something that was the capability of the Stage Five Taurus’s right hand, the Stage Four Gastrea Aldebaran.

“Why—” Rentaro said, gasping. “Why, Gado? Aldebaran has been sighted numerous times in the past. Why hadn’t anyone realized that it had this ability until now?!”

“I’m sure there are various reasons for it, but one is that we were probably all too caught up with how strong the Taurus troops were,” said Gado. “Until a year ago, when the girl of unknown citizenship and name called the world’s strongest Initiator came and unexpectedly killed Taurus, many cities were completely annihilated when trying to stop their advance. Most countries did not survive to bring home intel.”

Gado took the teacup Asaka held out to him, gulped the contents in one go, and leaned forward with a rustle of his armor, looking at Rentaro with belligerent eyes. “Besides, this isn’t the only trump card the Aldebaran troops have. Leader Satomi, you’ve heard of the Spear of Light that many civil officers are talking about, haven’t you?”

“That Gastrea that can shoot high-pressure mercury from five kilometers away?”

Gado widened his eyes in surprise. “High-pressure mercury? It’s shooting mercury?”

Rentaro nodded quietly. “I have a lot of excellent people in my adjuvant. It’s probably an archerfish Gastrea.” Normally, archerfish were tropical fish that used their pointy, funnel-shaped mouths to shoot compressed water and bring down insects near the surface of the water. They only measured about twenty centimeters or so in length, but they could shoot up to 1.5 meters. “According to one of our Initiators, the enemy is a giant Gastrea about ten meters across in all directions, so I can’t even begin to imagine how much pressure that compressed mercury is being shot out at.”

“I see…,” said Gado. “Well, anyway, we were calling the Gastrea that appeared suddenly yesterday *Gastrea X*, but after consulting with the Japanese National Security Council this morning, it was acknowledged to be as much of a threat as Aldebaran and was given the code name *Pleiades,* after the group of stars in the middle of the Taurus constellation.”

“Pleiades…”

Gado fished around in his breast pocket and pulled out two objects engraved with intricate designs. Rentaro could tell immediately that they were chess pieces, a king and a queen. “It’s true that, like you said, if we defeat Aldebaran,

we'll probably win this game. However, even if we try to defeat the king, the queen will definitely stand in our way. So in this game, we must defeat the queen in order to be victorious."

In chess, everyone knew without saying that the king was the most important piece in predicting the outcome of a game. And that the queen, who could move in all directions and had an unlimited range, was the supreme ruler of the battlefield. It was a perfectly fitting phrase.

"But this isn't chess, it's *shogi*, right?"

"Hmm?"

"The opponent's camp can use all the pieces that were defeated by the Gastrea virus. We're the ones that are being made to play by the rules of chess."

Gado seemed to be holding back laughter as he shrugged his shoulders queerly. "That might well be the case."

"How many people were killed?"

"It would be impossible to explain that in one sentence." Gado took a sip of tea from the cup Asaka proffered, crossed his arms, and looked down. "When the battle started, the enemy numbered about two thousand. However, the seven thousand decisive self-defense soldiers were defeated, and though the Gastrea forces lost five hundred, in exchange, it looks like two thousand of the defeated self-defense force troops were infected with the Gastrea virus and turned into Gastrea, adding to Aldebaran's numbers. Then, the expanded Gastrea troop of three thousand five hundred bodies came up against our five hundred pairs of civil officers, or a thousand people. The enemy lost nine hundred, but half of our pairs were killed as well—and sadly, it looks like a hundred of them were added to the enemy's numbers."

"In other words, the current match up of fighting bodies is…"

"Two thousand seven hundred Gastrea to our five hundred."

Rentaro was sure that wasn't all. They had suffered more serious damage than the numbers made it appear. There were, of course, the injured, but also those ten-year-old girls who were dispirited from the trauma of being suddenly thrown onto such a cruel battlefield. There were also many pairs whose combat power

was less than half because one of the partners had been killed. Even if those who lost their partners formed impromptu unofficial pairs, they could not be expected to be in sync. It would be better to say that their actual numbers were about a third of what they had left, or a hundred and sixty-six people.

“Those numbers are hopeless,” said Rentaro.

“I have nothing to say in response to that…,” replied Gado. “On top of that, today we must give an even more painful ruling.”

“What?” Slowly, the pressure from the gazes around Rentaro became even stronger, and he felt intense pressure from them.

The corner of Gado’s eyes narrowed sharply. “Leader Satomi, do you know why you were called here today?”

“What are you…talking about…?”

“You were not called here today so we could ask you to analyze Aldebaran and Pleiades. The fact of the matter is, we want to ask you about the independent action your adjuvant took when you left Hidehiko’s formation during the operation.”

When Rentaro understood what Gado was trying to say, he got chills down his spine. “Please, wait. We noticed the Gastrea that had gone to the back of the formation to prepare for a surprise attack and went to intercept them—”

“We have confirmed the corpses of the Gastrea to the rear of the main battle formation. However, appearances are appearances, and disobeying orders is disobeying orders. We must think of these two as separate.” Unlike earlier, Gado’s voice now had coldness mixed into it.

Rentaro realized that the winds were blowing in a strange direction and wiped the sweat on his palms hard on his pants.

“In order to maintain appearances in the army, even if just one person from the civil officer troops disobeys orders, I’m sure you can imagine what would happen. From the perspective of the other civil officers who did not know the circumstances behind your actions, what you did looks like deserting under enemy fire. In addition, you and your Initiator are a high-ranking pair with an IP rank of 300. Your actions caused a fatal disturbance in the other civil officers

who were desperately enduring their shaking knees to stand in line. I must have you pay for that."

"B-but—"

Even as Rentaro tried to argue vehemently, Gado cut him off completely. "It was rash, Leader Satomi. I hereby disband your adjuvant and sentence you to capital punishment. I will not hear any excuses. You disobeyed the orders of your superior officer and deserted under enemy fire. Those are serious crimes even among serious crimes. If I do not punish you, it will set the bad precedent that even if one disobeys orders, they will not be punished. Military troops with warped rules can no longer be called military troops. They are just a disorderly crowd. Especially now that the mood of defeat has grown stronger, discipline must be tightened."

At Gado's words, a heavy weight fell on Rentaro with a thud.

Capital punishment. In other words, death.

"S-stop messing around!" The instant Rentaro stood from his chair to try to get closer to Gado, a strong fist sank into his stomach, and he almost passed out from the blow.

"Oof." Rentaro couldn't bear it, and his knees bent. As he gritted his teeth against the pain, he looked next to him and saw the Initiator, Asaka, looking down at him with a bored look on her face.

The little—!

"If you move, you will send your life flying," she said.

Rentaro was forced to his knees, and pressing into his throat was the cold blade of a Japanese sword. Behind his back, he could hear multiple guns cocking, and as he glared at Gado with his teeth gritted, he received a pitying look. "Leader Satomi," Gado said, "I personally expected a lot out of you. It's unfortunate."

Damn it. Rentaro cursed his own carelessness as his clenched fists shook above his knees. When he had been summoned by Gado, why had he not sensed any danger? If he had been able to predict that this would happen, he could have thought of a way to deal with it. Instead, he just nonchalantly…

Rentaro lamented his own foolish actions and the fact that he could not find anything wrong with Gado's logic. Gado's reasons were completely valid. If the rules of the corps were to be the most important, then he had to punish whoever broke the rules, no matter who it was. If their positions were reversed, then Rentaro likely would have imposed the same grave punishment on Gado.

Resignation slowly took its toll. Rentaro's stomach felt as heavy as lead, and he started to feel dizzy.

"My…" He saw Enju's smile in his head. He felt stunned, and his vision grew dark as he sweat profusely. Then, finally, words of defeat passed Rentaro's lips. "My adjuvant… Please do not punish them… They were just following my orders. Please."

Gado snorted. "To think that the hero who defeated the Zodiac Gastrea Scorpion and saved the country is now on death row. Fate is ironic to the bitter end, isn't it?"

"Commander. There is no need to have pity on him. Let us execute this man here and now!" demanded one of Gado's subordinates.

Gado rejected his subordinate's suggestion with a wave of his hand and looked straight at Rentaro with a sigh. Then, he said, "Leader Satomi, are you ready to die once more?"

"Huh?" said Rentaro, startled.

"Commander!" said Gado's subordinate.

"Now, wait a minute," said Gado. "Leader Satomi, as you know, the battle we are fighting right now is a defensive battle to hold out until the construction of the replacement Monolith. However, there are also people who think we should not just be defending. If we were able to eliminate the symbol of the civil officers' current fears, the Gastrea Pleiades, then I believe we can find a way out of this blockade. However, we do not have enough troops that I can deploy elite troops to do the job." Gado stopped talking for a moment and gave a bold smile. "So I have a request to ask of you."

Gado stood with one hand on his cane, schooled his gaze, and spoke from his belly. "What I ask is for you to infiltrate enemy territory by yourself and

exterminate the unknown long-distance sniper Gastrea Pleiades."

Rentaro felt like he had been hit hard on the side of the head. He couldn't react for a good while.

"What I really want to say is to go and defeat Aldebaran, but it would be rash to go up against an immortal Gastrea without a plan.

"Asaka." Gado gave her an order, and she calmly operated the PDA device next to her. When she did, a giant 3-D image that seemed to bury the whole room appeared. In front of them spread the expanse of flat plains connected to the ruins that Rentaro and the others had requisitioned, and through the forest behind that was the memorial monument, the Flame of Return.

It looked to be a scale model of District 40, where Rentaro and the others were. There was something similar in Miori Shiba's student council room, but the accuracy and color of this was nowhere near as good as the one owned by the daughter of a multimillionaire.

From where Rentaro was, he could see the small mountain of powder in the back that was what remained of the Monolith.

"Currently, the civil officer and Gastrea troops are positioned equidistant from the Monolith with the Monolith between them," said Gado.

As if their hearts were beating as one, as Gado spoke, Asaka turned the model and drew a line. The line disappeared into an oval-shaped forest quite far away and outside the city wall. The forest was expansive, and there was a river that seemed to pierce its center. With a tree canopy that high, even a Stage Four Gastrea could hide in it.

Gado continued. "Because of the Gastrea virus, this forest has seen abnormal growth and diverse ecosystems. Somewhere in this forest, the twenty-seven hundred-plus Gastrea we were discussing are resting."

"Do you know what part of the forest Aldebaran and Pleiades are in?" Rentaro hedged.

"Unfortunately, no. Not even the highest resolution artificial satellite could tell us this. We do also have sixth-generation unmanned reconnaissance crafts, but the JNSC cabinet ministers are extremely unmotivated to send them."

“Pleiades, huh…?”

“That’s right. A being that the JNSC higher-ups are afraid to shoot down even with cruise missiles and support fighter aircraft. They had guaranteed us mastery of the air, but they have not brought that promise to fruition yet. Thanks to that, the flying Gastrea dealt us a lot of damage, and it was all we could do to defend ourselves. They really gave us a beating.”

The joke that even one powerful Gastrea could change the tide of a war was happening in real life. And the still unseen Pleiades that shot compressed mercury… According to Tina, it measured about ten meters on all sides. Since it was on land, its archerfish genes must have mixed with those of a land-dwelling animal, so Rentaro wondered what form it would take.

“Leader Satomi… No, Former Leader. Destroy it. You have no right to refuse. You only have a small chance of succeeding, but since you were supposed to die anyway, it will be no great loss if you go. Dead heroes are very easy to use, after all.”

Fury pierced Rentaro’s spinal cord, and he brushed off the men at his sides who were holding him down, pushed away the other subordinates trying to stop him, and pressed on determinedly toward Gado. Slamming the palms of his hands on Gado’s steel desk, Rentaro got so close to the man that he practically head-butted his nose. “You’ve finally shown your true nature, huh? You old weasel…!”

Gado smiled without changing the cool expression on his face. “But Satomi, these are also my honest, true feelings. Among the civil officers, there are those who mistakenly believe that we don’t need to fight Aldebaran anymore and can sit pretty for another three days. Unfortunately, once Aldebaran completely heals the injury I gave it, it will definitely attack again. This is the only chance we have to attack. Satomi, if you accept this mission, I promise that I will not charge your adjuvant for this crime. But if you refuse, I will punish you all together. It looks like you have an Initiator who adores you as if you were her father and a lovely childhood friend in your adjuvant. I’m sure you could not bring yourself to let them undergo such severe punishment.”

“Just try laying even a finger on Enju or Kisara… I’ll kill you!”

“Then, it’s decided. We will prepare the equipment for you. Go say your good-byes to your friends today.”

Rentaro closed his eyes and exhaled, then slowly opened them again. “There’s one last thing I want to ask. You all saw Aldebaran with your own eyes, right? What did it look like?”

The moment he asked, a startled expression crossed over everyone in the room. Gado had a frighteningly stern expression on his face and looked like he was about to shoot fire from his angrily narrowed eyes. “Satomi, unfortunately, I cannot answer your question. No, I do not *want* to answer your question. Last night, because of our encounter with the repulsive monster, none of us slept one wink. We will probably not be able to sleep well tonight, either. Do your best. I pray from the bottom of my heart that you will be able to complete your mission without running into Aldebaran.”

5

“Oh, Rentaro!” Enju welcomed him back cheerfully as she bounced out of the abandoned hotel, her pigtails swinging.

Enju’s voice started off a chorus of flurried others.

“What, Satomi?”

“He’s back?”

—And other such calls. All of Rentaro’s friends gathered around the door, noisily welcoming him back. Thinking they were overreacting, he checked the clock and was a little surprised. Apparently, he had been talking with Gado and the others for over three hours.

Kisara looked at him uneasily. “Did you get a talking-to for what we did yesterday after all?”

Rentaro said, “Let’s talk inside,” and they returned to the dining room en masse. He waited until everyone had sat down and calmed; he didn’t know where to start, but thinking that everything was important, he falteringly gave a

full account of what happened with Gado. It was a shock, as expected, and the part about Aldebaran's immortality and its attack after it healed its wound resulted in an air of silent despair among his team.

And then, Rentaro deliberately hid the fact that he had been ordered on a mission to subjugate Pleiades. "Sorry, everyone. It looks like our adjuvant will be disbanded after all. It doesn't look like we can avoid it."

"N-no… Wait a minute!" It was Yuzuki. Her gaze wavered, and she was obviously shaken. "I was finally able to make friends with Tina and everyone… R-Rentaro Satomi! Do something about it!"

"No, what bothers me is how light the punishment is." It was Shoma, who had been silent until now, murmuring with a hand on his chin. "The commander said from the very beginning that disobeying orders would be punished severely. Don't you think just getting our adjuvant disbanded is letting us off too easy, Satomi?"

As expected of Shoma, Rentaro thought admiringly, without letting it show on his face.

"Shoma, I'm sure that is because the commander also took into consideration the results of our battle and made the punishment lighter," Midori interjected with a smile.

Shoma did not look convinced but accepted her opinion. Midori's kindhearted reasoning was completely off the mark, but Rentaro was at least grateful that it kept Shoma from asking him more questions.

"Then, what'll happen to us?" Tina asked, her face clouding over.

Rentaro chose his words carefully to keep from upsetting her. "Maybe we'll be sent to support those adjuvants that have lost members? I don't really know, either."

"I-I see…," said Tina.

As if she had sensed the mood growing melancholy, Enju suddenly stuck her fist in the air above her head and snorted as she stood. "But even if we get separated, it's not as if we'll never meet again!"

“That’s…true, too.” Kisara nodded a beat later.

Beneath his sunglasses, Tamaki rubbed his eyes and sniffed. “It’s just as that bunny girl over there says. It’s a little sad to be sayin’ good-bye tonight, but that’s why I’ll turn this into a grand good-bye party!”

Everyone else looked at each other, grinning.

The time after that passed like a dream. They lavishly used up the rest of the food they had been rationed for the three days and recooked it desperately, filling their half-empty bellies to bursting. Inside the room, large candles burned brightly and turned everyone’s faces red. It put the room in a festive, birthday party-esque mood, and the dimly burning flames reflected in the eyes of Enju, Tina, and the other girls, shining lovely.

Among them, the irises of Kisara’s slightly smaller, cat-shaped eyes took in the light and reflected it in a bewitchingly beautiful way. Before he knew it, Rentaro was driven by the impulse to stare at it, but he didn’t want to seem impolite, so he quickly turned his head to the side just when it seemed like their eyes were about to meet.

Most of the time was taken by the girls complaining about wanting to take hot showers. On the other hand, the boys’ conversation was extremely pragmatic as they tried to calculate how much of the emergency stores were left after the fire at headquarters. Rentaro joked that at this rate, they would run out of provisions and have to hunt lizards and snails to eat, and Kisara, who had been raised a proper lady, said with her eyes half-closed, “You’re the worst.”

Tamaki brought some wine stolen from the wine cellar in the basement, and he had a cup with Shoma, who was also old enough to drink. Rentaro didn’t think that the boisterous Tamaki and reticent Shoma would get along, but he seemed to be wrong. Shoma was nodding quietly as he listened to Tamaki’s nonstop talking.

The gloomy, defeated mood had been blown away, and it made them forget for a while that they were in the middle of a war. Rentaro also started to feel better and had fun without worrying about the time. The party broke up in the wee hours of the night, and everyone went to their respective hotel rooms.

The hotel was small, with just three floors, and the windows were mostly still

intact. Rentaro even tried going onto the roof, but it was submerged, possibly from a clogged pipe.

The third-floor room Rentaro and Enju were assigned had two beds with a side table sandwiched between them. Part of the ceiling was broken, and insulation material was sticking out. The floor was covered with a thick coating of dust, but Rentaro saw that the dust on the bed had been brushed off. *Tina probably cleaned here*, he thought. The smell of mold that had been the room's inhabitant for the last ten years seemed to be a little like incense.

Rentaro lay on the bed and talked with Enju until the lights went out. She went on about various topics unchecked, adding exaggerated gestures as she spoke, and Rentaro nodded in response.

For some reason, Rentaro felt that he had to treasure this time.

Finally, Enju got tired of talking and fell asleep, and the sound of her breath echoed into the darkness. Rentaro's heart gradually grew colder.

And so, Rentaro Satomi realized that the last hours he had spent with his friends signaled the end.

Staring at the darkness in the ceiling, he waited a while longer, just in case, and then got up slowly. For some reason, the air that hit his body seemed much colder than earlier, but still he put on his shoes and his jacket.

Just as he quietly walked to the door and put his hand on the doorknob, a voice called his name, and he startled.

Looking back, he calmed his pounding heart. Enju seemed to be talking in her sleep. Rentaro didn't know what kind of dream she was having, but there was a part of her voice that seemed sad. Enju's expression was hidden by the covers, so he couldn't see it.

"Sorry, Enju." Looking downcast as he said this, Rentaro left the room. He went down to the dining room without encountering anyone else, and there, Gado's messenger was waiting by the fireplace. When Rentaro saw that the messenger had come into their temporary residence without taking off his shoes, he felt disgusted but was careful not to let it show on his face.

The messenger casually threw Rentaro a backpack. Taking it silently, Rentaro

upended it on the table, and the contents fell out. The first thing he saw was a heavy, rectangular mass. Feeling it over its wrapper, he saw that it was soft and pliable like clay. It was a C-4 plastic explosive.

In a former age, when nitroglycerine was first discovered, scientists of the time were troubled by how even the slightest shock could make it explode, but current explosives were so stable that they would only burn down when thrown into a bonfire and did not explode accidentally. Instead, they were detonated through the fuse and combusted with a large blast. They combusted at over eight thousand meters per second and could cause an astounding number of casualties. This was probably custom-made to work against Gastrea, with powdered Varanium and the like mixed in.

Besides that, there were portable rations, a canteen, a compass, a beta light, and various other survival goods.

Rentaro took off his jacket and hung his pouch and back holster from his belt and made a small adjustment so he could attach the silencer onto the XD gun at his hip. After pulling back the slide so it could fire, he stored it in the carbon-fiber holster made by Blackhawk! He checked the fit of the holster by practicing a few quick draws. He also hung the combat knife from his belt with the scabbard still on, then refitted his jacket over it all and grabbed a strap of the backpack.

Leaving behind Gado's lackey's indifferent look, Rentaro departed the hotel. He looked at the sky, pitch-black and starless, and heaved a sigh. The air outside had gotten even colder, too. In fact, it was cold enough that he would have believed it if someone had told him that it was late fall. He had not expected the Varanium ash to make the surface temperature of the earth lower this much. They were lucky, at least, that it was summer right now.

Rentaro looked straight at the fallen Monolith and started quietly toward it. The regular crunching sound of his footsteps on the ground sent Rentaro into the depths of his thoughts. In the end, he'd left without finding the right time to tell Enju and the others what was going on. Of course, he had thought about the option of telling at least Enju the truth and having her go with him. But after thinking it over, Rentaro had decided that it was his responsibility alone to take care of this and had chosen to go alone.

He had his reasons, of course—

“Satomi…”

Rentaro hid his backpack quickly and turned timidly toward the voice. He hadn’t been hearing things.

Shoulders hunched, standing stock-still and crestfallen with a shocked look on her face, was Kisara Tendo.

“Kisara, how…?” he asked.

“When I woke up to use the bathroom, I caught a glimpse of you leaving your room, and when I followed you, I saw your exchange with the messenger, and…” Kisara lifted her face and continued. “Where are you going?”

Rentaro quieted his heart and tried to put on an air of nonchalance. “I was going to the bathroom, too. What, Kisara, do you want to come with me?”

“S-stupid! Of course not!”

“Then don’t follow me. I’m just taking a walk after taking a leak.”

“Toward the Monolith?”

A freezing summer wind blew between Rentaro and Kisara. It sent Rentaro’s hair and Kisara’s skirt fluttering.

Kisara shook her head hard. “I can’t believe you. Haven’t you noticed, Satomi? I’m sure you’ve been given a crazy mission, but going alone is like going to your death.”

That was something he slowly understood after hearing the details of the mission. Ostensibly, this was a secret mission Gado entrusted to Rentaro, but in actuality, it was different. Rentaro’s name at least was known in the world as that of the hero who defeated the Zodiac Scorpion, so if Gado had punished Rentaro in any way, Gado probably would have faced internal criticism. For Gado, who wanted to unify the civil officers because they were at a disadvantage, that could possibly work against him. In other words, Gado was in the difficult position of losing unity whether or not he punished Rentaro.

That was probably why Gado came up with the plan to give Rentaro amnesty in exchange for defeating Pleiades. Of course, it was a mission that he was unlikely

to return alive from. Rentaro would be finished off by the Gastrea in the forest, so Gado wouldn't have to dirty his own hands, and Gado would be able to keep up appearances in front of the other civil officers.

In other words, Rentaro's mission was none other than a prettily decorated trip to the gallows. That was also the reason why he had not brought Enju. There was no way he could bring Enju along on a journey that would lead to her death.

"Why just you, Satomi? Don't we all share the blame for following you?" said Kisara.

It became hard for Rentaro to look at her face, so he turned his back to her. "Someone had to take responsibility. That's why I'll go."

"Let's run away."

"Where?"

He heard a sharp breath behind him as she faltered. "Well…"

"There is nowhere left to run in Tokyo Area. If we don't hold them back here, we'll die no matter where we run. I must avoid that, at least. Thank you, Kisara. But I'm going to go."

Rentaro strode forward without looking back.

"You really are stupid!" Her voice followed close behind him and seemed to pull at his hair. Desperately trying to control the feelings this stirred in him, he attempted to leave as quickly as possible.

Because of the black rain that had been streaking down since the morning, his boots scraping along the undergrowth were soon soaked and felt uncomfortable. His nostrils were filled with the strong smell of earth after the rain.

After walking a while, the fallen Monolith 32 grew large in his field of view. Its pieces had crumbled and formed a mountain of white debris, and only the pillarlike structures of the frame that had not been bleached remained standing in the mountain. The current spine-chilling remains seemed like some sort of grave marker.

What Rentaro found unexpected was that even after it became like this, the Monolith still seemed to evoke some sort of reverence in his chest. It was a massively enormous structure that surpassed UV rays, acid, attacks, and human intellect. He didn't know what to say now that it had collapsed, but thinking it appropriate to thank it for its hard work, Rentaro mourned it in his heart.

Rentaro made a large detour around the grave marker of the Monolith and finally stepped into Unexplored Territory. Although, since Monolith 32 had collapsed, the boundary between what was within the Monoliths and what was Unexplored Territory had become ambiguous.

Animals from the ocean could not live on land. Animals from land could not live in the ocean. At the water's edge, there was the undeniable boundary between life and death.

This was the same thing.

Humans could not live outside the Monoliths. Gastrea could not live inside the Monoliths because they would be exposed to the strong Varanium magnetic field. At least, that was how it was supposed to work. That rule was currently being overtly infringed upon.

This was a battle with the lives of the Aldebaran troops and all the survivors of Tokyo Area on the line. There was no way he could afford to lose.

Rentaro tried imagining what Aldebaran looked like, but no matter how hard he tried, it looked hazy and blurry. Even in the first picture he got from the Seitenshi, only the mouthparts had been lit up by the searchlight and could be seen clearly. He had not been able to see the other parts.

It would not age or die, it had the ability to corrode Varanium, and it could command other Gastrea using various pheromones. Even though he kept finding out about its fearsome abilities one after another, he did not have the least bit idea what it looked like.

And Gado's adjuvant wouldn't even be able to sleep well tonight because they had encountered Aldebaran.

The darkness of the night sent Rentaro's imagination in the wrong direction, and he gave a start at the silhouette of a parabolic antenna in his peripheral

vision. Rentaro shook his head. *Get ahold of yourself, Rentaro Satomi.*

Meanwhile, he had passed the expanse of flat plains and could see the ruins of the area destroyed by the Gastrea War. Just about when he passed the wreckage of a railroad crossing that was forever open, Rentaro started to think that maybe this area had once been a factory town. The abandoned pulp factory had pulp plastered everywhere and was becoming a grayish white, and the roof thatched with galvanized zinc sheet metal had turned red with rust. The beams seemed to be giving up on supporting the roof, and looked like they were inviting a collapse. Electric cables were tangled on the ground and looked like they would wrap around his legs. Of course, there was no electricity running through them, so there was no danger of getting electrocuted, but he was still careful. The adjacent roof that protruded as much as it could seemed to be entwined in a complicated way, and they looked like a single organism that had combined.

Rentaro tried his best to not make any sound with his footsteps, stepping slowly on the ground heel first. He stopped and strained his ears at even this slightest rustle of a mouse. He used his beta light to read his map and compass, checking his direction as he walked. Narrowing his eyes and looking far ahead, he could faintly see something that looked like a forest. Apparently, past these ruins was the forest where Gado had said the Gastrea were hiding. However, if he didn't go straight through and pass this long stretch of ruins, he would never reach the forest.

Rentaro thought over Gado's explanation inside his head. Ten kilometers one way. Twenty kilometers round trip. Assuming Rentaro walked at a speed of four kilometers per hour, he could make it back in less than five hours, but of course, it would not be that easy. Even now, he was using all his senses as he slowly marched forward with Gastrea in his surroundings, and even after he got out of this place, he would have to successfully find Pleiades and defeat it to return alive. No matter how well things went, it would take at least three times as long.

In addition, he did not know what Pleiades looked like. All he knew currently was that it was ten meters long and that it probably had funnel-shaped mouthparts that it used to shoot compressed mercury. He didn't have much to go on.

Rentaro hesitated, but he decided to go into the factory and move forward by

weaving from door to door. He decided that it was necessary in order to lower even slightly the possibility that he would get caught by one of the flying Gastrea since he had no way of knowing where they were observing from.

He had been prepared for it, but he started to see strange things here and there inside the building. There was a giant rusting gear of unknown use, and below that was a bloodstain from some unknown animal's entrails that looked like they had been splattered and painted on the wall, and the handrails in the hall had handprints of blood clinging to them.

Looking carefully, Rentaro saw that there were white objects dropped here and there on the floor. He picked up one of the bigger pieces and shone his MagLite on it. It was a piece of femur that had marks from where it had been chewed on and stripped of its flesh by some kind of animal.

This is bad, he thought as he forced his fear down. There was some sort of Gastrea that counted this whole ruin as part of its territory. He was probably smack-dab in the middle of that monster's property right now. He had to get out of here as soon as possible, but if he ran into the Gastrea before getting out of the forest, it would be bad.

He told himself that his first priority was to figure out what kind of Gastrea it was. He hadn't noticed until he turned on the MagLite, but he could see faint footprints of mud at his feet. They were pretty big, and each one was about as big as Rentaro's palm. From the looks of things, it walked on four legs. Also, stuck to the handrail that came up to about Rentaro's waist in the hallway was a piece of an animal's whitish fur. If it was already that tall on four legs, then it was probably pretty big. Leaning in and bringing his nose close to the fur, he could smell traces of animal. The leavings weren't that old.

Rentaro passed through a number of buildings until he entered what looked like a cement factory. He stopped at the strong scent of animal—it hit him like a wall. Passing a hallway with piping all over the place, he carefully put an ear to the rusted iron door beyond a broken conveyer belt.

Confirming that there was no sign of anything alive beyond, he opened the door slowly and quietly. When he got it partway open, the stink from the crack was so strong that he had to cover his nose. This was it. He was sure of it.

The stink of animal, rotting meat, mold, rust, and other things he couldn't name mixed together into something so strong it made his eyes water. He fought desperately against the desire to immediately turn around and run out of the factory. Chanting to himself to calm down over and over in his head and taking a deep breath, he opened the door with all his strength and shone his MagLite inside. The ring of light he slid from right to left exposed a vast number of dried-up human bones in the dark and made them disappear again. Before Rentaro knew it, he had covered his mouth and was desperately feeling around in his pocket for a handkerchief.

He had no room to doubt that this was where the Gastrea had feasted.

As if begrudging the opening of a secret room, the place seemed to respond with a sullen silence.

Rentaro made up his mind and stepped inside. His gaze was drawn to the flecks of dust dancing in the air as his light revealed them. Countless chains dangled from the ceiling, and a large, complicated machine was attached to the pipes.

Timidly taking a step inside, his shoes squished something damp, and he was surprised by the creak of deteriorating floorboards. Even though he knew it was impossible, he couldn't shake the wild idea that the next second, the skeletons would start laughing boisterously and stand up to attack him.

While leaning over to pass the pipes, he inspected a corpse that had not been completely bleached yet. It had received serious damage and most of it had sharp bite marks, large and small. It looked like this wasn't just one or two Gastrea.

Is it possible that the Gastrea is even raising young here?

Rentaro started to have an idea of what kind of Gastrea had claimed this area. If Rentaro's predictions were correct, then he needed to get out of here as soon as possible. He felt the urge to bury the corpses abandoned between the cold boards, but he didn't have time for that. He had no choice but to ask them to wait a little longer until they were able to reclaim their country's land from the Gastrea.

When Rentaro left the cement factory, he froze, panting.

The forest where Pleiades was lay right in front of him. However, his impatience spurred him to move more than before.

Rentaro continued on the jet-black pathway. The beam of the MagLite that he'd left on shook, and the silent road changed into something suffocating. When he got out of the town of dilapidated factories, it was all wild, and there was nothing left to take cover in until he got to the forest. He just had to get across.

Just then, there was a quiet sound he normally would have ignored, and steady footsteps coming from somewhere. Rentaro pricked his ears, making sure to not look back. It wasn't just one. There were at least five. And they were increasing.

Naturally, his pulse quickened and he sped up his walk. Pulling his gun out of its holster, he attached the one-touch mountable silencer. It would be another hundred meters before he reached the forest in front of him. Even if he got away, he didn't think his pursuers would stop chasing him, but he had hope that some might give up.

Rentaro wanted to start running immediately, but he desperately controlled himself, knowing that it wasn't time to provoke his pursuers yet. Apparently, they seemed to stop trying to hide their existence, and he could hear beastly howls from behind him.

He was getting damp with sweat as he grasped the grip of his gun. For just one second, Rentaro glanced behind him. They were enveloped in darkness, so he couldn't see details, but he confirmed silhouettes with four legs and rounder eyes than usual for a carnivore. The pairs of eyes amplified the trace amount of light and glittered dangerously, with vertically slit pupils shining red. From the position and height of the eyes, he predicted that each Gastrea was about the size of a lion.

They were all bigger than normal. Rentaro chanted prayers to Buddha.

They were wolves.

Actually, the Gastrea that gave civil officers the most trouble were not the grotesque-looking ones or the poisonous ones. When what would have eaten humans in nature—in other words, their ultimate predators, the animals at the top of the food chain—became Gastrea and formed packs, they became the

greatest threats to the corps. And here in Japan, the wolf undeniably occupied part of the food chain's top rung. The horror of wolves becoming Gastrea was unbelievable.

They were called "wolves in sheep's clothing" after the men who pretended to be gentlemen and escorted women home, only to make passes at them, and just so, these Gastrea wolves followed after their human prey persistently.

Nine times out of ten, normal wolves would not attack humans. However, that wasn't true after they became Gastrea.

After seeing the settlement at the cement factory, how could he have optimistically believed that wolves would not attack humans? These guys definitely killed humans and ate them.

"Aroooooooooooo!"

Suddenly, a wolf's howl shook the night and Rentaro's body was struck by metaphorical lightning. *Crap!* he thought and started running. The thin, almost sad howl was communication with the other members of the pack. In this case, it was without a doubt a command to attack.

Rentaro heard countless footsteps and ragged breathing behind him. He gritted his teeth and fired off shots, half turning, the kickback hitting him in the shoulder. Because of the silencer, the whole gun was longer, and it was harder to turn and aim; he ended up firing randomly as he ran. He kept running, without checking to see if he hit anything.

Rentaro ran through the animal trail he had turned into his own path and ran into the giant forest, pushing his way through the rough forest dense with prehistoric Jōmon cedars. Grasping at the rotted leaves and scattered puddles, he jumped over the intricate roots protruding from the ground.

Making sure to shine light on the ground with the hand holding the MagLite, he told himself, *Be careful.* If his feet got caught and he fell, then he would be surrounded and tortured to death.

The sound of footsteps ran alongside Rentaro in a fan shape. He couldn't see them, but he could feel the pressure of their terrifying, high-powered pursuit.

Suddenly, he heard panting from directly in front of him. When he pointed his

light toward it, his vision was filled with a large, open mouth full of fangs lunging toward him. Reflexively, he bent his upper body back, and the massive jaws clamped the air where his neck had been. As the large body passed by, he froze.

When did it get in front of me?

Just then, his feet tangled in fright and he tripped on a root. *Shit*, he thought, as his torso pitched downward and the tree root approached him frighteningly fast, giving him no time to take a defensive stance. The world shook, and he suffered a blow to his brain. He didn't even have time to groan in pain as one wolf Gastrea bit his artificial leg and shook it ferociously. He hurriedly cut off the pain sensors, but his nerves had already sent the shock straight into his brain.

Rentaro sighted his XD gun even though he was still lying down, knowing it would be almost impossible to hit. He pulled the trigger three times. The 40-caliber Varanium bullets pulverized its fangs and jaw, and one shot hit an eye. Seeing the wolf retreat with a shrill canine yelp, he thought, *I did it.*

However, there was a sudden heavy attack to his chest. His sternum grated loudly as a body that weighed at least two hundred kilograms leaned on top of him. A wolf's massive front paws sank into Rentaro's chest almost amusingly, and Rentaro let a groan out from between gritted teeth. A wolf other than the one that had mounted his chest opened its mouth wide and blew its beastly breath and drool toward his face.

The fear of being eaten pierced Rentaro's spine, and in desperation, he flung his right arm up and stuck it into the wolf's mouth. "Haaaaaaaaaahhh!" He ignited his explosive-style arm. In a moment, the wolf's face distended at terrifying speed and the next instant, it exploded. A huge amount of spinal fluid and blood splattered on Rentaro's face.

Avoiding the giant body as it fell with violence, he jumped up and checked around him. He was surrounded.

Then, how about this?! He stuck his right fist into the ground and activated his arm again. He used a striker to set off the bottoms of the cartridges inside and fired. There was a metallic clang, and the ejector kicked out empty golden shell casings that repelled the night as they rotated. A small explosion started from Rentaro's feet, and sand and gravel was kicked up with intense speed as it

covered his vision.

The wolves were flustered and moved back somewhat. Seeing the break in the enclosure around him, Rentaro fled with all his might. He ran all-out, without pacing, and soon all the strength left his body and he hurt all over. His vision grew hazy. He was covered in mud, panting heavily, pulse racing, and he felt so sick that the contents of his stomach threatened to come back up.

Inside his head, the part that was still thinking calmly rang an alarm bell. He couldn't continue like this. Wolves followed their prey by smell. If he didn't remove his own scent, then they wouldn't stop chasing him. What should he do?

He put his arm on a grove of prehistoric cedars and turned around, and suddenly his vision widened. Rentaro went dizzy with despair. The path ended abruptly and turned into a steep cliff.

Shining his light on it, he saw that it was a long way down, maybe twenty meters to where the river at the base of the cliff flowed. It was flooded from the black rain that had been falling since morning and surged with thunderous roars. If he jumped in, there was no guarantee he would survive.

He was surprised by a growl immediately behind him and turned around. His hand slipped with the momentum, and he dropped his flashlight. He hurriedly tried to pick it up but accidentally kicked the back of the light instead. It spun quickly, like a top, and with the light still on, as it strobed the landscape from light to dark, it brought out shadows of countless wolves from the darkness, only to have them disappear again.

Rentaro took a step backward, dumbfounded. *What in the world…?*

There weren't just ten or twenty wolves. From the glowing red eyes he saw between the cracks just now, no matter how he counted, he estimated that there were almost fifty of them.

He took another step backward in despair and tripped, almost losing his balance. The fragile part of the cliff crumbled away, and he could hear the sound of the pieces rolling down the steep slope.

Rentaro swallowed hard. Predatory beasts approaching from the front, a cliff at his back. He closed his eyes, exhaled, and slowly opened his eyes again. Using

his right leg as an axis, he spun his body halfway around and turned his back to the wolves, looking at his feet.

Without the MagLite, he couldn't see the bottom at all and could just barely hear the violent flow of the muddy river. He wasn't in his right mind. He berated himself for almost losing his breath at the sight of the wide-open mouth of hell below him.

Behind him came the growls of the wolves and the sound of their footsteps sidling up beside him. The soles of his shoes seemed to have grown roots, for he had to forcefully peel his feet away as he forced himself to jump. He felt an uncanny floating sensation when the wind hit his face; he was getting sucked into the darkness at amazing speed. He flapped his arms to maneuver himself to fall feetfirst, but it didn't work.

Abruptly, his whole body was hit with something hard, and he almost lost consciousness. But he was forced aware again by the frigid water that streamed over him. The flooded river started to carry Rentaro's body away with the force of a roller coaster. Even if he opened his eyes, he couldn't see even a meter in front of him in the muddy river. He was stunned witless for a second, until he started struggling desperately to find a handhold. However, he'd lost his sense of equilibrium and couldn't tell if he was heading up or down, and his screams turned into muddy bubbles.

Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of a pitch-black mass, and it was approaching him. By the time he realized that it was a large, sharp boulder standing in the bottom of the river, it was too late. With the impact much stronger than he imagined it would be, his backbone creaked and most of the air in his lungs turned to bubbles and was forced out of him.

He crashed over and over into driftwood and boulders, and still unable to tell up from down, he spun like diseased leaves being scattered by the wind, turning over and over on the river bottom. Rocks the size of fists pelted his body all over like slugs from a shotgun. He was about to lose consciousness again. If he let go of the reins of consciousness right now, he knew instinctively that he wouldn't wake up again. He waved his arms around desperately.

Suddenly, Rentaro's right hand grabbed onto something. When he realized

that the rough protrusion was a handhold on a rock, he made a split-second decision to stretch out his left hand as well and go against the rapids. Blood was streaming from the top of his shoulders. He gritted his teeth and clung on with his whole body, yelling as he heaved himself upward.

Before he knew it, Rentaro was lying faceup on a rugged bank, his chest heaving up and down. As he vomited the water that he had swallowed, he fought against chills that made his stomach feel like it was going through the wringer. Finally, Rentaro lifted his pallid face and looked around.

Before the Great War, it had probably been a mooring place for boats. There was a small concrete pier with an abandoned mooring rope, and next to it he could see a dark brown shack. Gazing at the black rapids that looked like ink had been poured into them, he told himself that he was not completely out of danger yet.

Rentaro wrung out the dirty water from his uniform and stood up unsteadily, holding his aching body as he changed out his equipment. He hadn’t noticed that the backpack he was carrying had been washed away, and the silencer had also come off, but at least his gun was still stored in its holster. It was a painful realization that his food rations, water, and the explosive he had gotten to defeat the Pleiades had all been washed away.

Relying on the dim glow of the beta light, he went into the shack and found a match and portable fuel. There was alcohol and food, too, but it had been abandoned for more than ten years, so he decided that it would be better not to touch it. His uniform was heavy with the water it had absorbed, and his consciousness was about to give out, but in order to run away from those fearsome predators, he just had to move.

However, he reached his limit faster than he thought he would. Unexpectedly, his vision wavered and his knees weakened. Rentaro fell to his knees. A wheezing sound escaped from his throat and his body trembled like he had the ague.

When he looked up again, he saw an enormous tree trunk that pointed straight into the sky. This was probably thanks to the Gastrea virus. Giant sequoias that were easily more than five hundred tons were growing here and there, and just the outer circumference of their trunks was probably about ten

meters.

When Rentaro found a good clearing, he gathered firewood and laid out the solid fuel. The matches were damp and his hands shook, so he lost some matches before he finally lit a warm fire on the tenth try and managed to carefully move the subsequent fire. As the red flames grew bigger, he let out a sigh of relief from the bottom of his heart.

After much effort, he peeled off the clothes twisted around his body, gave them a good wringing out, and put them back on. His body was covered with scratches and bruises, but seeing that he was able to move, he figured he did not have any broken bones. He was still worried about tetanus and other bacterial infections, but when he remembered that the portable dose of antibiotics was also in his backpack, his face twisted wryly.

After his body had warmed up somewhat, the tense knots of nervousness also started to come loose. As if waiting for just that second, there was suddenly a sharp pain in his side.

“Ow… Gah!”

A large shadow the size of a lion had bitten Rentaro’s side, and fresh blood was spraying out. More than the pain, he felt dumbfounded.

Rentaro retreated to lean against one of the sequoias, holding his side. “Those guys…sure are persistent,” he managed to squeeze out between pants.

At Rentaro’s words, the pack of wolves appeared smoothly out of the shadows of the trees. They showed no sign of being afraid of the bonfire.

Why are they still here? he thought over and over in his head. Hadn’t he taken a gamble and jumped into the river to wash away his scent to avoid letting them use their highly developed sense of smell? He thought that much and then shook his head. It wasn’t worth thinking about. They had followed Rentaro down from the cliff and through rapids; they weren’t going to stop now.

Just then, the hedge of wolves suddenly split, and a gigantic Gastrea walked out from the depths of the darkness. It had round pupils and a pointed snout like a canine, and its silhouette was slightly short and stout rather than sharp. Its white fur gathered more red as it reached its back, and on all fours, it was

already over two meters tall, making all the other wolves look like pups.

It was a Japanese wolf, said to have been extinct since 1905. Its canines were overgrown and looked like a saber-toothed cat, its tail was split into three, and one of its eyes was cloudy. Its fur was shedding all over the place. It looked as evil as the watchdog of hell.

It was probably a Stage Three, and no doubt the leader of the pack.

Rentaro's legs became unable to support his body, and he slid down to the ground with his back still on the tree trunk, leaving a diagonal trail of blood along the way. Checking the wound in his side, he saw that the hand and shirt he had been using to press down on the wound was bright red. It was a serious wound that needed immediate treatment.

Rentaro gritted his teeth and looked up at the sky. Was today the last day of his life? If so, what had been the point of his sixteen years of life? Was the hominid called Rentaro Satomi put on this earth for sixteen years just to be eaten by Gastrea in the depths of this dark forest today? Irreplaceable memories flashed in his mind, and before he knew it, tears welled up and flowed down his cheeks.

The leader of the pack walked in front of him with sneering eyes, filling Rentaro's vision with its open mouth.

But right before Rentaro was devoured, the wolves suddenly perked their ears. They changed the direction of their stances, tilting their bodies forward. As they growled, they focused on the darkness beyond the bonfire before Rentaro.

He looked in the direction of their gazes hazily, but Rentaro couldn't make anything out. However, the wolves could see something. Just as he thought it, the pack of almost fifty wolves howled and rushed into the darkness. Immediately after, there was the sound of combat and yaps of pain.

Rentaro didn't know how much time had passed, but suddenly, all the sound stopped, and the place was filled with silence. He heard the bonfire popping and the sound of an owl hooting from somewhere. *What just happened…?*

Rentaro leaned the top half of his body forward and looked hard at the depths of the darkness in front of him. Suddenly, something was thrown at superhigh

speed into the trunk of the sequoia next to him, and the sound of pounded flesh echoed.

Rentaro gazed in wonder. That something that had been thrown into the tree was one of the wolves that had attacked him. Its neck was twisted with an abnormal strength, its tongue was sticking out, and a straight line was carved into its stomach. With the crash, a flower of blood bloomed on its face, and it became clear that it was dead.

Seeing the slash on its stomach, something stirred in Rentaro's memory. Where had he seen this nightmarish swordsmanship before…?

He raised his voice in surprise. This was the same thing as what he had seen with Enju three days ago at the civil officer frontline headquarters. They had found civil officers dead on the street while they were recruiting members for their adjuvant. It had looked like a quarrel between civil officers, but it had ended in him not knowing who had actually done the killing. The two civil officers lying piled on top of each other had been carved with the same swordsmanship. Why was this *here*?

"Is there anyone who saw what happened?"

"C-could you be Rentaro Satomi?"

At the scene of the crime, this was the first thing the witness had said.

"What if I am?"

"Uh… Y-you… Never mind, it was my mistake. Forget about it."

"Huh? What do you want?"

"I said, forget about it!"

When Rentaro had spoken, sounding irritated, the witness had turned and left the scene before Rentaro had a chance to call him back. Thinking back on it now, that was a strange dialogue. Why did the witness go out of his way to check Rentaro's name and then insist that he had made a mistake afterward?

Could it have been something like this? What if a civil officer pair that was definitely not supposed to be there *was* there? A pair that had been defeated by Rentaro and Enju and were treated as if they were dead and removed from the

civil officers' list? That's why the witness doubted his own senses. *Because there was no way dead people could walk around…*

There was one. Just one pair that could maneuver such a sharp slash and that was supposed to have died in their clash with Rentaro and Enju during the summoning of the Zodiac Scorpion. Why hadn't he noticed until now?

Three more wolves were blown out and crucified on the tree trunk in succession from out of the darkness. There was a cross cut into their stomachs, a death cross—the universal symbol of God's authority over those who were going to die.

Rentaro's arm flung up, and he aimed his gun into the darkness. After a while, the leader Gastrea of the pack came stumbling out. Both of its saber-toothed cat fangs had been broken, and it was covered in cuts. There was a deep wound on its neck, and fresh blood dripped steadily from the wound and dyed its white fur red. The Gastrea looked with pleading eyes as its head shook left and right, and then fell to the ground with a plop. The body seemed to be at a loss for a while after losing its head, but it finally fell sideways to the ground, shaking the earth as it fell, and then stopped moving altogether.

*

“Papa, I think he’s the guy that was with Enju.”

“Oh my.”

There was the sound of a bell, and first, a white-gloved hand grasping the tree trunk firmly appeared from out of the pitch-black darkness. Next, a face with a white mask and silk hat was revealed, reflecting the orange light of the bonfire. In his crimson red tailcoat were the double guns, Spanking Sodomy and Psychedelic Gospel. Next to him, with short swords in both hands wearing a frilly black dress, was a young girl.

Goodness.

“Fancy meeting you here—my dear friend.”

“Kagetane…Hiruko……!”

The strongest magician whom Rentaro had ever fought in a life-or-death contest appeared.

6

To think that he would one day sit around a fire with this man…

Rentaro held his gun at the ready as he used his teeth and left hand to wrap a bandage around his stomach, never letting his guard down.

The bleeding at his side had stopped at least, but if he tried to do too much, it was possible that the wound would open up again, so his movements would be limited for a while.

Rentaro’s gun was trained at the people sitting on the other side of the fire facing him.

Kagetane gave a forced shrug. “I wonder if you might put that gun down soon.”

“No,” said Rentaro.

The man threw a dry branch into the fire. “Have you already forgotten who provided you with the bandages and antibiotics?”

“What about you? Have you already forgotten what you two did?” Kagetane and Kohina Hiruko. They were the terrorists who had summoned the Zodiac Scorpion, driving Tokyo Area to the brink of destruction. Rentaro had used the railgun called the Stairway to Heaven to end the matter before anything happened, but one wrong step and it could have turned into Tokyo Area’s Great Extinction.

“If I get serious, your little toy gun’s not going to work, you know.”

Rentaro was at a loss for words. He had experienced firsthand the despair-inducing defensive ability of the repulsion force field Kagetane used; the thing could repel antitank rifles. Yet after all this time, Rentaro still didn’t know what the man was after.

In their encounter earlier, while Kohina had asked enthusiastically, “Papa, can I kill him?” Kagetane had made her be quiet and threw over bandages and antibiotics himself.

Their relationship had once been one where they were after each other’s lives. There were a lot of reasons for Kagetane to hate him, and no reason for Kagetane to help him.

Rentaro’s nervousness didn’t go away as he gently put the gun down. “Why are you here in the Unexplored Territory? Are you helping old Kikunojo with more of his conspiracies and doing some secret maneuvering?”

“Oh dear, can you please not ask any leading questions? No comment,” said Kagetane.

“You were the ones who killed that civil officer pair on the street in the frontline base three days ago, weren’t you?”

“Let’s see.” Kagetane put a hand on his chin and looked at the girl. “Do you remember, Kohina?”

The Initiator beside him, Kohina Hiruko, hugged both arms around her knees and covered her face, staring at Rentaro with upturned eyes. “You must be an idiot. How can I remember every little ant that I trample?”

Rentaro was speechless. He realized again the difference between his values and those of these killers. Explaining morals to these two was likely to be more futile an endeavor than preaching to aliens.

Kohina looked next to Rentaro for a second and then at him with upturned eyes. “Where’s Enju? Is she dead?”

“She’s alive. She’s doing something else.”

“I see.” She spoke curtly, but her mouth smiled happily. “Enju…I want to see her, I want to kill her. I want to see her, I want to kill her. I want to see her, I want to kill her.”

Just then, Rentaro noticed that there were now four short sword scabbards on Kohina’s back.

“Satomi, what about you? Why are *you* in a place like this?” Kagetane asked.

Rentaro couldn’t decide whether or not to tell the truth. Would it be safer for him to bluff and say that his friends were close by? “I’m here to defeat Pleiades.”

“Pleiades?”

“The unidentified Gastrea that can shoot mercury at long distances. Apparently, it’s in this forest.”

“Yeah, apparently it is.”

That response was suspicious as hell. “Don’t tell me you guys were also in the line of battle yesterday fighting against Aldebaran?”

Kagetane laughed so hard he held down his mask, as if it was the funniest thing he had ever heard. “Of course not. I climbed the tallest tree in the area to get a better view. Why should we have to fight? What good would it do us?”

“If we don’t fight, everyone will die.”

“So fight, and then what lies ahead of that?”

“Peace.”

“I have never desired that.” Kagetane looked at Rentaro with pity in his eyes. “I can bear an eternal hell. I can bear this body being half-carved open and dissected. But you know, if peace and joy were to continue forever, I would

scream and plead for someone to kill me.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Are you saying I wasn’t until today?”

Rentaro and Kagetane glared at each other wordlessly as the bonfire sent up flames and started burning stronger. Rentaro shifted his gaze first. He couldn’t suppress his anger at everything the man did, but even if he threw himself on Kagetane now, he would most likely be swiftly murdered.

Kagetane sprinkled what looked like seasoning into the camp pot that was set over the bonfire and stirred the contents with a spoon. Finally, salted-plum rice gruel was served on a plastic tray. It wasn’t a dish that sounded very appetizing, but Kagetane had probably made rice gruel on purpose out of consideration for the injured Rentaro, offering him something easier to eat.

Since his backpack had been washed away by the river, Rentaro had exactly zero food rations on him. And there was no chance that he would be able to get any in the future.

There’s no way he poisoned this, right? Rentaro thought as he waited for the two of them to eat theirs, before timidly slurping a spoonful himself. It was salty, and there was some kind of soup stock in it as well, so it tasted less like gruel and more like *chazuke*, but it didn’t seem like the taste was being covered up by salt like many store-bought versions; rather, it left a curious aftertaste. Rentaro was surprised to find that it was an understatement to call it delicious.

Kagetane himself flipped up his mask and slurped the gruel with neither relish nor disgust, but the flames of the bonfire threw up intricate shadows. Unfortunately, from where Rentaro was sitting, the other man’s face was a shadow and Rentaro couldn’t see what it looked like.

Rentaro finished eating in no time and helped clean up since he had nothing better to do, continuing to stare at the man’s creepy face cover.

“Why do you wear a mask?” he asked finally.

Kagetane seemed to also be done eating and had put the mask back on. “Satomi, do you *not* wear a mask?”

There was a short pause before Rentaro replied, “What are you talking about?”

“I can see the mask you wear, you know. The *guardian mask* you wear when interacting with your Initiator, the *Tendo Civil Security Agency Employee mask* you wear when you work as an employee of that female boss of yours, and the *facing the enemy mask* you’re wearing now with me. Aren’t they all different ‘Rentaro Satomis’?”

Was this man talking about psychological personas?

“Satomi, did you see my real face just now?”

“No.”

“You were right not to try. I’m sure you’ll regret seeing my real face.”

“You saying you’re disfigured or something?”

Kagetane shook his head scornfully as he tapped on his mask. “What’s under this mask—is your face, Rentaro Satomi.”

“Stop messing around, you bastard.”

“You and I are the remnants of the New Humanity Creation Project. Twins, so to speak. I’m sure you’ve also noticed, right? We’re human, yet we have power greater than that of other humans. Have you ever wanted to kill someone you couldn’t stand? Have you ever wanted to violate a woman by force? That artificial arm could make all of that happen easily.

“I’m sure you’ve had the thought before, when you were exposed to outrageous violence, ‘I have enough power inside me to make you all into mincemeat.’ I was able to make that a reality. That’s why you hate me. Because you’re jealous.”

“Shut up!”

“But you know, Satomi, just like the honor student hates the delinquent, the delinquent hates the honor student, too. Do you know why? It’s because each person can do what the other cannot. Just like you envy me in the bottom of your heart for being able to kill as I please, I also envy and hate you. Even though you are as inhuman as I am, you live comfortably in the world of light. I detest

you so much I can't stand it."

Kagetane's white mask suddenly came toward Rentaro and whispered into his ear. "Come with me, friend. We're both survivors of the New Humanity Creation Project. We're special beings. I'll teach you the pleasures of killing as much as you like. Kidnap a woman, and after you rape her, pluck her arms and legs off and kill her. I'll teach you how to use money, too. You can buy everything but poverty. You can buy love, and respect."

"I'm not going to change how I use my power."

A fat piece of firewood broke apart in the flames and fell, sending a shower of sparks into the sky and making Rentaro's and Kagetane's profiles dazzle for a second.

Kagetane wore his silk hat low over his eyes and hid his gaze. "Let me make a prediction, Satomi. You will definitely come over to my side. Without a doubt."

"Give it up. There's no way that'd happen."

Next to them, Kohina didn't seem the least bit concerned about their conversation and silently got another helping of the rice gruel, polishing off most of it by herself.

They ran out of things to say to each other, and when the firewood burned out, they used that as a sign to retire for the night.

Rentaro's body had already reached its limit with exhaustion, and his whole body felt heavy and slow. Even now, his eyelids felt like they were about to close. But there was no way he would fall asleep before the other two. Rentaro pretended to sleep and didn't let his guard down until he saw that Kagetane and Kohina had truly fallen asleep.

The bonfire smelled like burnt embers.

His body clock told him that about an hour had passed, and when he heard Kohina's regular breathing that meant she was asleep, his eyes popped open, he grabbed his XD gun, and snuck over to where Kagetane and Kohina were sleeping, crouching. They seemed carefree, sleeping on their sides while holding each other and sharing a blanket.

Rentaro silently aimed his gun at Kagetane's head.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kagetane asked without moving a muscle.

"You were awake?" said Rentaro.

"What a fine way to treat us."

"You don't seem worried, Kagetane. Is your barrier one that you can pull up faster than I can pull a point-blank trigger?"

Kagetane didn't say anything.

Rentaro glared at Kagetane with hatred. "Did you think that if you were nice to me, that I would cry with joy and be your friend? Did you think to bury the hatchet by putting me in your debt? Too bad. You're dangerous. As long as you're alive, you'll definitely cause another disaster. I have a duty to kill you to maintain public order as a civil security officer."

"Will you kill my daughter, as well?"

Rentaro took a fleeting glance at the soundly sleeping Kohina. "Is she really your daughter?"

"Of course. Satomi, do you know about the jar of poison? A large number of insects and snakes are put in a large jar and made to eat each other until the last one left is said to be the strongest, the one with the most cursing power. Long ago, when I was still young, I kidnapped five women and artificially inseminated them. At the same time, I also gave the embryos a large dose of the Gastrea virus."

Rentaro was at a loss for words. In other words, Kagetane had created artificial Cursed Children.

"Then, I locked my five daughters into separate underground rooms for six years, training them to kill and brainwashing them. And then one day, I had them meet for the first time and try to kill each other. The one who survived was Kohina."

"Why did you do such a thing…?"

"You've gotta be kidding." "That must be a joke."—To be able to reject Kagetane's madness with empty words like that, to preserve his own peace of

mind, was something that could have been done only by the Rentaro that existed before he had known what kind of person Kagetane Hiruko really was. Now, Rentaro imagined that Kagetane probably really did conduct that devil's experiment.

Kagetane continued. "I wanted to know everything about this world. I wanted to rule over everything and discover the truth. I wanted to know what those girls who were the future of the humans species really were."

"You demon. What do you think a human life is?"

"I didn't know. That's why I tried conducting the experiment."

"Children are innocent beings! They can be raised to be angels or devils. It's your fault, Kagetane! It's your fault that this girl turned into a devil."

"Aye, I wanted to try making a devil. But I failed. What was born was an angel that just got in the way." Kagetane softly stroked the sleeping Kohina's hair and quietly lifted her chin. "Look at this. This adorable sleeping face. My unsightly, repulsive, sweet little monstress. These girls are strong as a biological species, but they also have an unfixable weakness."

Just then, Kohina stirred and made a small sound in her sleep, and then whispered something that seemed completely out of place. "I love you, Papa."

The muzzle of the XD shook with a start, and Rentaro was astonished. *Why? Why?* He wanted to shake Kohina's shoulder to wake her up and then scream at her, "You're being tricked! Your dad is brainwashing you!"

Kagetane looked sideways at Rentaro's reaction and sneered inside the depths of his mask. "Satomi, what is the happiness of a human? I made this child live for six years confined like a frog at the bottom of a well. But she just kept looking up at the blue sky from the bottom of that well."

"Stop screwing around! How many people do you think have *died* because of you two? Just how many people have you *killed* up till now?!" His gun hand shook with anger.

"Please stop, comrade. Even if you could kill either me or Kohina, you'd surely die before you managed to kill the other."

Do it, Rentaro Satomi. If you don't kill this man today, he will continue to spread death like an epidemic. You won't get a better chance than this to stop him. Kagetane is bluffing. Don't be tricked. Abandon your reason. To hell with thinking calmly. Fulfill your duty.

But no matter how much he thought it, his trigger finger was frozen and would not move.

Rentaro squeezed his eyes shut. "Damn it!" He put his gun away and went to a fallen tree in desperation, sitting down angrily. "I'm grateful for your help with my wound. But I can't trust you two."

Saying only that, Rentaro watched Kagetane and Kohina as they sprawled on the other side of the fire, his trigger guard still on his gun.

The flames of the bonfire seemed to sneer at him as they moved. *It was the perfect chance. And you just wasted it.*

7

It smelled like dirt. And grass.

Rentaro could sense just the slightest bit of light on the other side of his eyelids. His shoulder felt cold, so he tried to pull up his blanket, but he couldn't feel the familiar smoothness on his shoulder, and his hand waved in the air a few times until his consciousness suddenly awakened.

He stood up with a start and looked around. He had fallen asleep without realizing. Before him sat the smoky remains of a bonfire with just the faintest warmth still remaining. Realizing that his clothes were tinged with moisture, he looked around and understood why: There was a thin layer of morning mist, and the sky was cloudy. There was still no sign of the sky returning to normal from its covering of Varanium ash.

There was no trace of Kagetane and Kohina in the spot where they had been sleeping. Rentaro was silent at that—it looked like they left without doing anything to his person, even though they had had plenty of chances.

He checked the time. It was 8 a.m. He had fallen asleep around 3 or 4 a.m., so he was not fully recharged, but considering the situation, it wasn't too bad.

Allowing his feet to go where they wanted, he pushed through the place that had been too dark to see last night. There was almost no undergrowth; instead, it was a mysterious scene with enormous, giant sequoialike trees continuing all around him. As if territorial in their own way, after a while, the stand of trees turned into different kinds of vegetation. The prehistoric Jōmon cedar, sitting in the middle of a nest of roots sticking out of the ground, was where Rentaro had tripped while being chased by the large pack of wolves the day before and thus gotten into trouble. Lichens, too, grew thick between the countless bumps of the fat tree's bark, and there were smashed cars stuck to the trunks, lifted up as if purposefully surrounded.

Rentaro gazed at the sight for a while. If he had woken up next to this scene without reference, he would have succumbed to loneliness and despair, believing himself to have been thrown into the distant future where material civilization had collapsed, and he was cut off from returning to his own time.

It still was not completely clear what effect the Gastrea virus had on plants, but even so, it was hard to separate it from how big they had grown in the ten years since the war. Of course, the plants had gotten better at surviving their environment. There were even absurd instances where there were forests like the Amazon inside Japan, such as during the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident.

The area where Rentaro found himself was part of the Unexplored Territory near the Monolith, so this was still not as bad as other places.

There were two days until the replacement Monolith arrived.

"So you were in a place like this, huh?"

Rentaro was surprised by the sudden voice and turned around. "Why are you here?"

The owner of the voice was who Rentaro thought it was. There was a girl looking at him sullenly with undisguised wariness, holding four short swords; and a mysterious man with a mask and silk hat. "There was one thing I forgot to tell you yesterday," said Kagetane, holding down his mask. "We encountered that Gastrea you call Pleiades yesterday, once."

“Where?!”

As Rentaro braced himself to take a step toward Kagetane, the man suddenly raised an arm. “Just follow the river upstream. There’s a big Gastrea campground there. I didn’t see where the compressed mercury was being fired from, but that’s probably Pleiades.”

Campground. Even Gastrea have campgrounds, huh? That was something Rentaro had been wondering about since he entered the forest the day before. He’d been sure that the instant he entered the forest, there would be Gastrea concealed all over the place and had readied himself for that, but in the end, the only Gastrea he had encountered were the wolf ones.

In other words, the two thousand Gastrea of Gado’s estimates were gathered in one place resting—like a human company of troops.

“Why are you telling me this?” Rentaro demanded. In the past, the man in front of him had tried to summon the Zodiac Scorpion in order to break down the Monoliths. And his motivation for committing the crime was to restart the Gastrea War to give the New Humanity Creation Project a reason for existing—in other words, he had fervently wished to be needed.

From Kagetane’s point of view, the current Tokyo Area where the Monolith had collapsed by chance should have been his ideal. Even though Kagetane had saved Rentaro last night, the biggest reason he couldn’t trust Kagetane was because of the worst-case scenario: that Kagetane was on the side of the Gastrea.

Kagetane narrowed his eyes behind the mask and laughed. “Now, I wonder why? I don’t really think about things like that much.”

How serious is he? Rentaro wondered.

“If I had to say, it’s because I like you. But unfortunately, if you continue like this, you will definitely die.”

Rentaro couldn’t help but be at a loss for words.

Kagetane continued. “You’ve been strange since yesterday. You said you were working separately from your Initiator, but you don’t seem worried about her at all. You seem to be prepared for the special mission of defeating Pleiades, but

there is no sign of your adjuvant around at all. If this was an official mission, then it would be a little hard to think that they would send a lone Promoter out to assassinate a Gastrea. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that you left your squad because of your own justice or were banished for some reason."

He couldn't make a single strangled sound because it was exactly as Kagetane had said. Rentaro wanted to retort with something sarcastic, but he reconsidered, thinking that he couldn't buy the location of Pleiades for all the money in the world. Honestly, thanking Kagetane would be offensive, so he snorted and walked past them, starting to walk toward the river for now.

But with the sound of his boots stepping on dirt, Rentaro noticed that there were other shoes mixed in. "Hey, what are you doing?" Stopping and looking back partway, he saw that Kagetane and Kohina also stopped short, as he suspected, about ten paces behind him.

Kagetane shrugged and spread out his arms. "I wonder what? You just happen to be in the path upon which we are also heading."

"Do what you want." Rentaro snorted in desperation and hurried forward quickly, but he soon heard footsteps behind him again. Rentaro succumbed to the mysterious feeling of annoyance mixed with bewilderment.

After the wolves in sheep's clothing came Kagetane in sheep's clothing…

It was such an unfunny joke that he felt his cheek spasm. "You bastards walk in front."

"No thank you. I do not want to suddenly be attacked from behind."

Rentaro scratched his head. *Damn it, what the hell is this?*

After following the river for a while, Rentaro left its banks and climbed up a small mountain to check the time. As morning turned to afternoon, the temperature rose, and with the warming air, their body scents would be lifted higher; it was safer to gain altitude to keep the Gastrea from sensing them before climbing down again at night.

Rentaro looked sideways at Kagetane and Kohina next to him, not letting down his guard. He couldn't calm down with them there, but Kagetane said he didn't want to walk in front either, so that was the compromise. His bizarre

companions traveled with him, as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Next to him, Kohina was loudly—intentionally so—breaking the bar of chocolate Kagetane had given her while continuing to check Rentaro's movements. She seemed to be saying, *Papa said I can't kill you, so I won't kill you…just yet.*

Because chocolate bars were a lightweight, high-calorie food that didn't take up much space, they were fitting for survival supplies, and Rentaro had heard that the self-defense force and other military organizations gave it to their soldiers as portable provisions. He had thought this since watching the food preparation process yesterday, but Kagetane seemed to be even more of an expert at survival than Rentaro had ever imagined. It was nice to have someone like that in his party—of course, that was if he was an ally and not an enemy.

"Satomi, look at that." After they had climbed up a steep protruding rock face for a while, Kagetane handed Rentaro a pair of digital binoculars.

Rentaro checked the state of his wound where the wolf had bitten him and kneeled down, looking through the binoculars in the direction Kagetane indicated. He got chills like someone had put a block of ice down his back and ducked reflexively, looking at Kagetane.

"Did you see it?" Kagetane asked.

"Below that?" said Rentaro.

"If it's in the same place as it was yesterday, then probably, yes."

Rentaro looked hesitatingly through the binoculars again. In the optically enlarged world, there was a large flock of bird-shaped Gastrea flying in a circle over a fixed spot, and underneath were trees densely woven together, their thick canopy spread out such that it blocked even sunlight.

Suddenly, a dull noise echoed and a titanic tree shook hard; the birds it housed hurriedly took flight en masse. The leaves at the tops of trees rustled, and he could tell that a large being was moving through the forest. Rentaro's heart thrummed with nerves. It was there. There was some kind of land-dwelling Gastrea in that area.

"Good timing. It's going to rain soon," said Kagetane.

Surprised, Rentaro lifted his face and saw the man looking up with a hand stretched out over his head. Following Kagetane's gaze, Rentaro also looked up. The weather had been cloudy since the morning, and it didn't look like there had been much change to it.

As if understanding Rentaro's misgivings, Kagetane continued. "The sound is echoing pretty far. That's because the temperature is rising, and there's more moisture in the air."

Just then, there was a rumble of thunder from the clouds, as if backing up Kagetane's words.

He's like a prophet, Rentaro thought in awe.

In any case, the rain was welcome. Their smell would be washed away by the rain so canine Gastrea wouldn't be able to track them, and the noise from the rain would also make it harder to hear their movements.

However—

"It's that black rain again…?" Rentaro had learned the main points of World War II in history class, and he couldn't help but connect the black rain to the atomic bomb and felt a physical aversion to it.

There were no adverse effects to humans being rained on by the ashes from Special Varanium; in fact, if the bleached Monolith had even a little magnetic field left to give off, the rain could possibly even restrain the Gastrea's movements a little. However, yesterday, when the black rain first poured down, the citizens who wanted to protect the home front became panicked, and the radio and news incessantly repeated "Don't worry" to calm the panic.

Suddenly, Rentaro thought about how Enju and the others were doing. Half a day had passed since he had fled into the night. Everyone in the adjuvant had probably already figured out that Rentaro was gone.

He wondered how Kisara had broken the truth to Enju. Did she tell Enju straight-out that he had left on a mission from which he had no hope of returning alive? Or did she try to give Enju hope by telling her that he would be back eventually?

It was probably the latter. If Enju had known that Rentaro was in danger, she

was likely to follow him and rush into the forest to cause a small disaster. There was no way Kisara would not realize that.

Suddenly, he had the urge to hold Enju tight and just breathe in the smell of her hair.

In any case, he had to defeat Pleiades first. If he safely completed his mission, then Gado probably wouldn't lump any more blame on him. He would defeat Pleiades and boldly return to Enju's side.

Rentaro glared straight at the Gastrea campground.

8

The sky soon began to cry. Like the day before, there was a large amount of rain. In a bad mood, the sky rumbled, but there was still no lightning yet.

As Rentaro climbed upstream, he wiped the raindrops from his face and looked at the palm of his hand. The raindrops coiled about like diluted ink.

After a while, a three-tiered waterfall spread out in front of their eyes. It was as wide as the river itself, and the top tier had a drop of about three meters, the middle tier about two meters, and the bottom tier about three meters again. Normally, it might have been a beautiful scenic spot, but currently, the river was a dark reddish-brown, muddied from the dirt, sand, and rain, and the fact that it was about to overflow.

Yesterday, Rentaro had jumped into such a fearsome muddy current.

"We should probably jump to the other side now, while we can," said Kagetane.

"Yeah." Rentaro immediately nodded at the suggestion. The Gastrea campground they looked down on from the top of the slope was probably on the other side of the river.

"Kohina."

"Yes, Papa." Kohina released her power, and her eyes turned a bright red. Kagetane offered her a shoulder, and they got to the other side in one jump.

Rentaro watched them jump and then went to the bottom of the waterfall. There, he found a thin path at the back of the basin and walked across. He didn't feel like being at the mercy of Kohina.

The waterfall roared as it splashed down with impressive force, and there were no sure places to put his feet. In addition, there was slippery moss covering the path, so he had to be extremely cautious as he crossed.

Just then, he noticed a small hollow in the back of the basin. He tried sticking his hand in but felt the cool, slimy rock face and pulled his hand back quickly. It wasn't like in a movie, where the back of the hollow continued on; it simply ended presently. It wasn't that interesting, so he hurried forward, but then there was a slick sound as his feet slipped on the rock and kicked forward.

Wagh—

His whole body pitched forward. He was only able to stop himself and stand up again by sticking his hand on a sudden protrusion on the wall.

He caught his breath after the shock. This time, Rentaro walked deliberately and carefully across to the other side. The moment he took his last step, he heaved an involuntary sigh of relief.

Seeing that Rentaro had safely crossed, Kohina clicked her tongue.

They continued north, checking the compass to confirm. On the way, they finally stopped following the river and entered the thick, luxuriant forest. Compared to the forest with the giant trees where Rentaro and the others had spent a night, the tops of these trees weren't that impressive, but there was no comparing how much denser the plants grew here.

Rentaro took the lead, followed by Kagetane and then Kohina. Rentaro crouched as he marched, quietly taking out the Varanium survival knife from his hip. In a close-combat fight, it would be faster than sighting his gun and pulling the trigger.

In the Unexplored Territory, it was a hard-and-fast rule to move without making any noise. Rentaro's XD gun had lost its silencer when he had been washed away in the river, so since they were nearing the crowd of enemy Gastrea, he definitely couldn't make use of it.

There were many ferns at their feet; Rentaro spotted gingko and Adiantum. Bearing with the black rain in his eyes, Rentaro used his survival knife to move the intricate tripe-shaped leaves, and his field of view widened unexpectedly. There, he saw a strange scene and signaled behind him to stop.

What is this?

"Everything's been bitten off, huh? What *is* this?"

Surprised, he looked next to him and saw Kohina slip past Rentaro like she was not the least bit nervous. Rentaro checked around him to make sure there were no Gastrea around before he followed behind her.

There were many trees almost two meters high growing wild, but strangely, the leaf blades of this tree had almost all been bitten off by some kind of living being. Finding a whole leaf, Rentaro saw that it was flat, like broadleaf trees. Since the leaves looked like they had been bitten off by some sort of herbivore, it was strange that all the other trees around it were unharmed.

Where have I seen this leaf before…? The second understanding shot through his brain, Rentaro let out an "Ah!"

"Do you know what this is, Satomi?"

Rentaro nodded silently. Even someone with such extensive survival knowledge like Kagetane couldn't be expected to distinguish between South American plants.

"This is a coca leaf…"

"Coca? As in…"

"The plant that the raw material for the alkaloid from which cocaine can be extracted."

Kagetane put a hand to his chin. "I don't understand. Why have these been bitten off? Of course, it was a Gastrea that bit the leaves off, right? What in the world was it after?"

"The Gastrea must also be using it as a stimulant." Alkaloid plants and their derivatives could stimulate the central nervous system and temporarily block fears. Rentaro thought back to his first fight against the Gastrea the day before

yesterday. Even when they fired on them with guns, the Gastrea in the front row yelled but did not fall or stop advancing. They had probably chewed these leaves beforehand for their stimulant and painkilling properties.

Rentaro had conjectured all this on his own, but he still found it hard to believe. Even if they developed intellect, chewing coca leaves before going into battle was too far beyond what ordinary insects and animals could do. Before long, it was possible that Gastrea that could speak human languages and/or something similar could appear. Of course, human and animal vocal cords were very different, so it was uncertain whether they would be able to converse like humans, but still…

When Rentaro looked carefully, he saw that all the plants had been beaten down in a uniform direction, and there were a number of footprints. There was no doubt that Gastrea often came through this area.

Just then, they heard a groan that was obviously inhuman, and each looked in that direction. Suddenly, they saw two vertical shadows in the curtain of rain.

Rentaro gulped. They were snakes with four legs, standing upright. They did not have the long, narrow faces of lizards, but rather had flat, apelike ones. The legend of the Chinese gods with human faces and snake bodies, Nüwa and Fuxi, passed through his head.

The moment seemed to last forever as both sides acknowledged their sudden encounter with the enemy, and the Gastrea took a deep breath to call others of their kind.

This is bad.

Before Rentaro could rush out, Kohina had thrown two of her short swords at high speed. Her aim was true, and one sword skewered the brain of the Gastrea on the right, killing it before it got a chance to call out.

The Gastrea on the left twisted its body quickly to avoid the other sword, but it couldn’t get out of the way completely, and the short sword pierced its chest. Ignoring the Gastrea’s cry of anguish, Kohina pulled out another two short swords from their sheaths and ran in faster than the eye could follow. With a light sound, Kohina jumped up and landed on the short sword before jumping again. Leaping up to where their noses almost touched, she inserted her blades

to destroy the brain, quickly killing the Gastrea.

The two monsters fell to the ground at almost the same time, shaking the world as they did so.

Rentaro looked at the scene, dumbfounded.

“You’re weak. That’s why you will die.” With a cold glance, Kohina poked the corpses with her foot, looking bored.

As Rentaro watched, chills shot down his spine. He bit his lip—he definitely did not want to reunite Enju with Kohina. Kohina and Enju were completely evenly matched. But added to that was Kohina’s cruelty. Seeing that this girl was not shy about it at all, it was possible that she was not even aware that killing was wrong.

Rentaro suddenly remembered how Kagetane had called her an evil angel. Rentaro had definitely been saved by some crazy people—devils he met in a hell called the Unexplored Territory. So that made this…the second level of hell.

“Now, Satomi. We are nearing the enemy’s inner circle.”

Rentaro nodded without saying anything. They had been hearing a growl that sounded nothing like the rain from beyond the forest for a while now.

And then that omen became reality.

Rentaro and the others, who were going through the forest halfway up the mountain, had prepared themselves already, so no one screamed in an unsightly way even after seeing it.

“So this…is the enemy’s base…,” whispered Rentaro.

Beyond their vision was an open area with various types of Gastrea, big and small, as far as the eye could see. There was a large organism that looked like a platypus, complete with a wide bill and a shell on its back. There was also a mouse with the faces of two different organisms stuck together in a strange place and covered with a chitinous exoskeleton. Could the roadrunner that had gotten so big it looked like a dinosaur fly with those wings it had? It was like a parade of demons in front of his eyes, but in modern-day Japan.

A putrid breath blew over to where they were and made Rentaro’s lungs feel

like they were going to rot.

Because Stage One Gastrea were just a larger version of animals that already existed on earth, they were able to make formations with others of the same type, but the Stage Twos and above did not fit in; they were around the edges and were all different shapes and sizes. They just ended up resting all over the place, it seemed. The camp was made up of all different sizes, from small Gastrea to some so large they could be mistaken for small mountains, and they continued as far as the eye could see.

Rentaro could see a giant fly Gastrea staggering around with one wing ripped off, probably injured from fighting the civil officers and self-defense force. When he looked more carefully, he saw that some Gastrea had lost legs or had eyes that had carbonized white. Based purely on numbers, the Gastrea had an overwhelming advantage, but the Gastrea were in no condition to fight.

Aldebaran should have also been there somewhere, but there were so many Gastrea that Rentaro could not find it.

“Isn’t that the Gastrea you all call Pleiades?” said Kagetane.

Following Kagetane’s gaze, Rentaro saw it: sixty, seventy meters distant.

“That’s…” Of course, it was Rentaro’s first time seeing Pleiades, but he instinctively felt that that must be it. He roughly estimated it to be about ten meters tall and wide. It matched the report from Tina’s Shenfield.

It stood out a head and shoulders above the Gastrea around it, and its mouth stuck out like a funnel just as he had imagined it would. It still kept some fish characteristics, but its eyes were set apart like those of a herbivore’s, and its mouth was more like that of a stork or pteranodon than an archerfish.

The first thing to draw the eye was its swollen belly. It was inflated like a balloon, and it was so blown up that even now it seemed like it would float up into the sky. The pectoral and dorsal fins seemed to have atrophied and could not be seen, but in their place were things that looked very much like human hands and feet with five fingers and toes.

Rentaro didn’t understand what was going on. Compared to its swollen belly, its arms and legs were much too short. With those, not only would it not be able

to bring the prey it shot down with the compressed mercury to its mouth, but it also couldn't even move the way it wanted to. That beast was a failure even by the warped standards of evolution of the Gastrea virus. If left alone, it would be eliminated through natural selection in no time. How in the world did it survive to see this day?

His doubts were cleared up unexpectedly quickly. A Gastrea that looked like a demon monkey climbed adeptly up Pleiades' balloon stomach. As Rentaro watched rapt with interest, the monkey Gastrea shrugged its shoulders and made its whole body tremble as it regurgitated fish from its throat to give to Pleiades.

Gastrea helping each other. Rentaro felt like he was witnessing an important part of Gastrea ecology.

An unhappy-looking Kohina poked him with her elbow. She seemed to be saying, "If you're going to go, hurry up."

Rentaro looked at Kohina and then Kagetane and gave a big nod, then detoured around the forest to get closer to Pleiades. It went without saying that this was Aldebaran's base. If they were discovered by the enemy and surrounded…

Rentaro calmed his shaking breaths. This was a critical moment. He needed to calm down and do his job. He felt like he was about to slip in the muddy path, and the rain that started just then chilled the extremities of his arms and legs, so he was already numb. He hadn't had enough sleep, either, and most of all, being in constant fear for his life was wearing on Rentaro's nerves.

He had also become part of the food chain. He had never been as aware of that fact as he was today.

Just then, Rentaro took a wrong step—his boot stepped on and broke a twig that had fallen to the ground. Even in the midst of the sounds of the rainfall, the dry snap reverberated.

One of the reptilian types sleeping nearby lifted its head slowly with a growl and shook its head left and right.

Holding his breath, Rentaro stopped moving and closed his eyes. All he could

do was pray.

Finally, the Gastrea's neck seemed to wind back into place. Rentaro heaved a massive sigh.

Detouring around the forest, Rentaro cautiously drew near to Pleiades, and his neck slowly tilted more and more. The creature's enormous body practically filled his vision, and a low, heavy growl came from what could have been its chest or its stomach, which was expanding as it breathed, blowing away rain with its breath. In the rain, white steam was coming off its hot body.

This really is a huge Gastrea, he thought again.

"What were you originally planning to do once you got to this point?" Kagetane asked in a low voice, frowning.

"I was planning to set a plastic explosive and blow it up from a safe distance. But I lost the explosive along with the backpack when I was washed away by the river."

"Then there's only one way to kill it."

Rentaro looked at his exposed, black-chrome right arm with mixed feelings. The original purpose of the New Humanity Creation Project was to create human weapons that could destroy the Gastrea.

The tactical ideology of Section 16 that Kagetane had been affiliated with was to create the ultimate defense that could stop the attack of a Stage Four Gastrea, and Section 22, where Rentaro had undergone unexpected medical treatment, had the ideology of creating an ultimate attack that could rip through the shells of Stage Four Gastrea.

In other words, both of them were designed to deal with all Gastrea besides the nonstandard Stage Fives.

According to Kisara, the former Seitenshi had called Rentaro and Kagetane the ultimate spear and shield, which was a fitting name for them. If that was the case, then it was possible for him to eliminate Pleiades by using his arm the way it was meant to be used.

Suddenly, a snicker came from next to him and he turned to it. Kagetane was

holding his mask and giving off an air of brutality. “That’s great. I’ve always wanted to go up against something like that. I’ll kill it.”

Rentaro was shocked. “Hey, wait. I’ll go.”

“I don’t take orders from you.” Saying that, Kagetane left for the thicket they had seen earlier.

Rentaro was dumbfounded for a moment but then soon followed him, pushing Kagetane aside with his shoulder. “You can’t do anything with your attack power. Stay back.”

His shoulder was shoved back. “Injured people should stay back. That’s my prey.”

“Y-you bastard…”

Just then, a nearby Gastrea finally noticed them. Rentaro and Kagetane clicked their tongues at the same time and moved forward in the rain side by side. Rentaro was in a good mood, and Kagetane held down his silk hat. It was the walk of people who had given up trying to hide and had resolved themselves.

Rentaro’s heart beat loudly. They had to do this in one hit.

Rentaro’s explosive-style artificial limbs and Kagetane’s repulsion field were both techniques that were far from being silent, and it was not hard to imagine the fearsome counterattack that would follow upon letting off such an attack in the Gastrea base. Therefore, their plan could only be to take one attack and withdraw quickly.

Pleiades noticed them. It looked at them with reddish eyes that looked like they had a film of oil over them, but it did not look like it was going to take any action. Rentaro had seen it before. Those eyes were eyes that had given up on everything. Rentaro looked beyond his own position and couldn’t help but sympathize with the monster. It had evolved only its ability to slaughter until it was unable to move freely, and was only being kept alive because it was being fed by other Gastrea.

“Well then, shall we?”

“Yeah.”

It was a strange feeling. In the past, during the many times he had fought against this mysterious man, he could not bear the reality that they were both alive and breathing at the same time. When Rentaro's spirit of justice mixed with hatred and clashed with Kagetane's logical evil, Rentaro and Kagetane could only deny the other's existence with their whole souls. That was the only way they could see to resolve their situation.

But then why—how could he feel that he could rely on a man like that right now? What was this uplifting feeling he felt in his chest?

The Gastrea around them screeched warnings to their comrades in response to the humans that had suddenly appeared in their base, but it was too late. There was a high sound, almost like the air itself was being cut, as Rentaro and Kagetane pulled back their arms.

"Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 3—"

"Endless—"

Phosphorescence gathered around Kagetane's hands and formed into a sharp spear. At the same time, three empty golden cartridges flew out of Rentaro's right arm and bounced on the ground with metallic clangs.

Rentaro's and Kagetane's eyes met.

"—Rokuro Kabuto, Burst!"

"—Screeeam!"

The right fist with great mastery of technique in it and the shining demon spear of darkness drove into the abdomen of the Gastrea Pleiades at the same time. The sound of the impact reverberated out right afterward and blew the leaves off the tops of the trees, making the forest shake. The center of the explosion caved in, lifting up the bedrock and blowing it backward.

As Rentaro's rotating arm thrust powerfully, he felt his arm swing through. Pleiades' skin, which had been reinforced to keep it from getting crushed by gravity, was split open and scattered in all directions. The creature was extinguished from the earth without even having a chance to scream.

Under the Gastrea's shocked gazes, Rentaro tended to his fist that had heated

up and took the Infinite Stance and focused; meanwhile, Kagetane put his silk hat back into place.

Rentaro realized that he had completed the mission to defeat the Gastrea Pleiades. He groaned involuntarily. There was an intense pain in his side, and he fell to his knees and coughed, unable to bear it.

His wound had opened up.

“Papa, hurry!” said Kohina.

Kagetane did an about-face and started running. Immediately, there were angry bellows in succession behind them, and the air shook. Almost three thousand Gastrea contacted their comrades to report an enemy attack.

One side of Rentaro’s face twisted with the dull pain, and he ordered his body to move, but his movements were slow, and he naturally protected his side as he ran. His vision turned hazy and his legs became tangled. He almost fell. He had used up the last of his strength with that last attack.

“You’re too slow!” He was suddenly pulled so hard he felt like he would dislocate his shoulder, and his body felt like it would be torn apart with the sudden acceleration. Opening his eyes while he gritted his teeth against the assaulting wind pressure, he realized that Kohina had taken him by the shoulder and was flying through the air.

“Why are you…?”

Kohina pretended not to hear, and jumped off of boulders and tree trunks, making Rentaro’s vision shake.

He felt like he was being shaken in all directions by her violent running, and he started to feel nauseous. Still, he held on tight so that he wouldn’t fall off. He definitely did not want to scream, so he gritted his teeth. Behind him, he could hear angry bellows here and there that seemed to bunch together into a single roar. Danger signals resounded in the back of his mind.

Their restless enemies had finally started to follow them in earnest. Of course, there was the threat of the fast-moving Gastrea, but if flying Gastrea also started following them…

Ignoring Rentaro's misgivings, Kohina jumped from tree trunk to tree trunk as fast as a tornado. He grazed his cheek slightly on a giant tree, and the rough leaves cut his face.

Light suddenly appeared on the opposite side. Kohina darted over with a vast leap and they continued on that road in the opposite direction, running through the forest where they could see the cloudy sky, light rain, and the swamp they were following.

"Over there! There's a small hollow in the back of that waterfall!" Rentaro pointed at the three-tiered waterfall downstream of the river.

Kohina didn't spare a single glance in his direction, but Rentaro could tell that they were on the same page by the way Kohina made her steps lighter. She silenced her footfalls and ran in the direction of the waterfall.

With just two jumps, she brought them to the waterfall and let go of Rentaro without warning.

He couldn't deal with the unexpected floating feeling and awkwardly flapped his arms in midair. Immediately after, he spun over and over with sharp pain hitting all over his body. He felt like he had just jumped out of a speeding train—and decelerated like it, too.

Before he knew it, he was lying facedown. The rocks along the mountain stream hit him, and he thought he would lose consciousness in another moment. His joints hurt. Just breathing made his lungs hurt.

Damn it, is she trying to kill me?

"Hurry!" When he looked, he saw that Kohina was beckoning him, unconcerned about the details. Behind them echoed the sound of the earth rumbling as their pursuers followed them, and he desperately used his hands to push himself up and walk through the catwalk of the basin of the waterfall, practically hurling himself into the hollow in the back to hide himself.

Not five seconds passed before a soaked Kagetane also rushed in, looking like a drowned rat. "Will they really pass by us if we stay here?" he asked.

"There's nowhere else!" Rentaro snapped.

“You two are both too loud!” Rentaro was taken aback by Kohina’s roar and shut his mouth. After that, they didn’t talk anymore and just holed themselves up in the crowded hollow, trying to quiet their breathing and hide.

The short and shallow rise and fall of Rentaro’s shoulders quieted down, but it meant that he could more clearly hear the vibrations of Gastrea pounding on the ground, and his world shook. In front of them was a curtain of water, and because of the rain, the Gastrea were not supposed to be able to pursue them by smell.

Rentaro closed his eyes and made a hard fist.

After a while, the loud cries passed over them, and the large group of Gastrea went by. This didn’t feel like real life.

Finally, their cries faded away with the Doppler effect.

Rentaro was about to give a sigh of relief when the ground shook loudly, and just as he was about to fall into the waterfall basin, Kagetane grabbed both his arms.

There was another loud vibration. Rentaro’s body floated in the air, and his feet danced. He broke into a cold sweat. This time, it was an outrageously large Gastrea walking toward them.

“Last night, because of our encounter with the repulsive monster, none of us slept one wink.”

Gado’s words echoed through Rentaro’s head. Could this possibly be what he had been talking about? The general over all the enemy, the Gastrea Aldebaran?

The low rumble of its breath made the air vibrate, and the stink of animal attacked Rentaro’s nose.

It was here. He couldn’t see it, but he could tell by its overwhelming presence.

A giant Gastrea was plopped right above the hollow where Rentaro and the others were hiding. What in the world did it look like?

What’s wrong? What’s it doing? Hurry up and leave. Why isn’t it moving?

Rentaro started to panic. *Don’t tell me it’s noticed where we are?*

Just then, the waterfall in front of them split open, and the earth quaked as something large poked into the waterfall basin.

At first, Rentaro thought that a stone pillar had fallen from the sky. But no, it was a leg. One of the Gastrea's gigantic legs had stepped into the waterfall basin by chance.

That did not mean that they had been noticed yet.

Rentaro pushed his back deep into the hollow as far as he could.

Finally, the giant leg was pulled out of the waterfall basin, and the Gastrea's steps gradually faded away.

Rentaro slid down the back of the hollow.

In the next two hours, Gastrea came near them intermittently, but none of them came as close as Aldebaran. Rentaro didn't know where it had gone. Right now, all he could hear was the sound of the muddy water flowing past them.

However, since they'd been spotted, the Gastrea were on guard; if they were seen again, it was less likely that they would be able to escape again. The three of them were in agreement about not moving until nightfall.

After they waited another two hours, the dim, lead-colored sky had quickly turned into an indigo blue, and now, it was completely dark. It was hard to tell from the back of the waterfall basin, but it looked like the rain had also stopped.

For Rentaro, having to hide himself in the hollow with a constant sheet of spray flying in was a cruel trial. Blood loss had made him pale, and he was shivering uncontrollably from the cold. Earlier, he'd injected himself with morphine, but it seemed to be wearing off, and now he was being attacked by stabbing pains.

He'd sewn up his side with the needle and thread in his first-aid kit, which lay at the bottom of his survival knife under the back flap. Multiple times, he'd almost lost consciousness from the ordeal, but he was determined to survive despite it all. In the end, he covered the affected area with a pad of biological glue called fibrin and wrapped a bandage over it.

When his mind was fuzzy from the morphine, various memories ran through it

unchecked. He remembered how, at the Tendo Civil Security Agency lit orange by the setting sun one day, Kisara started complaining about how they didn't have any clients, and Tina mollified Kisara as she served tea. Enju stuck her head into the fridge without permission and started rifling through the stockpile of food, and Rentaro, who had been put in charge of accounting, glared at the unforgiving finance software as he desperately grappled with the numbers.

Even though the memory wasn't that old, it seemed to be fading into sepia, slightly blurred with tears. For some reason, the casual everyday scenes had become irreplaceable. They were like an edited movie of happy endings with all the kissing scenes strung together and pressed in on his heart.

"Rentaro." A voice suddenly called his name. The outline of the person was blurry, but a clearer image slowly focused on his retina. A square face with rectangular glasses, with hair that was over half-white, and rounded cheeks with deep laugh lines that gave the impression of being overwhelmingly kind.

"Dad."

Takaharu Satomi. The father who had passed away ten years ago when Rentaro was six years old.

"Mom and I will be there soon, too." Saying that, Takaharu had pushed Rentaro onto a full train and told him the name where he was to evacuate —*Tendo*.

Don't go.

However, Rentaro knew what happened next: He knew that his father would not evacuate to Tokyo Area. The next time he saw his parents, they were in coffins.

"Rentaro." His father kept calling his name.

Tears ran down Rentaro's face. Why didn't his parents come for him? His father said that they would be there soon…

Liar. I believed you. I loved you.

"…tomi…Satomi…"

"Dad."

The blurry square face he had been looking at turned into a cold white mask before he realized it. The path between dream and reality was severed, and he reflexively jumped up.

“Did your father wear a mask or something?”

“Sh-shut up.” Rentaro turned away to hide his hot cheeks, but when he did, the pain in his side returned immediately. He shook his head as he pressed down on his eyes, rolling with pain. “Where are we?”

“We’re still in the waterfall basin. However, there’s something strange going on outside. Go out and look for a second.”

Rentaro’s head still felt like it had been stuffed full of mud. But he crouched and, when he got outside of the water, saw large, round footprints pressed into the ground, with tracks of something crawling in their center. It looked like Aldebaran didn’t walk upright, and had at least six legs.

The wind was blowing too hard and cold.

At first, he was on guard for Gastrea outside, but when he looked around, he soon noticed the strange feeling Kagetane had.

It was too quiet.

“There aren’t any Gastrea around here anymore, huh…?” said Rentaro.

“That’s right. I had Kohina scout out their camp earlier, but it was empty,” he replied.

Rentaro felt like cold water had been poured on him. “They weren’t there? Not a single one?”

“That’s right. It looks like the Aldebaran troops have started to move.”

Move. Where? No, it’s obvious: the civil officers’ base.

That meant Aldebaran had recovered from its injury.

—Enju!

Rentaro sprang to his feet and started running. A voice behind him called for him to stop, but he paid it no mind. Since he’d already been seen by the enemy once, he should have moved far more cautiously, but impatience won out.

There was no sight or sign of the enemy anywhere in the forest, which actually worked for the better, since he could run at full speed. He jumped from cliff to cliff, ran over mountains and through valleys. He didn't know how much he had run. He stumbled out of the forest, out of breath, and the space in front of him widened. He squinted at the light of flames and flares.

Bizarre silhouettes were clumped together and attacking fiercely, scattering the puny humans below them. In fact, there were so many fewer people by comparison that it wouldn't have been strange for Gado's troops to have fallen apart already. The desperate bitter fight continued, but it was as plain as day that they would not last long.

Enju and the others were in the midst of that. If anything had happened—

He had no time. He took out his cell phone with shaking hands, switched it to satellite mode, and pulled up a number.

It rang ten times, and then the person on the other line answered in bewilderment. "Satomi, this is not the time for—"

"Lady Seitenshi, please listen! I have defeated Pleiades. You can use missiles and fighter aircraft now," said Rentaro.

The Seitenshi gasped but regained herself quickly. "Please, continue."

Rentaro reported the coordinates of the enemy troops' position verbally and then requested fire support quickly after that. "I'm counting on you, then."

"Oh, wait, Sato—"

Rentaro hung up and waited impatiently, praying.

Before long, an object came in at such high speeds that it was impossible to track with the naked eye. It rammed into the back of the Gastrea troops and exploded. A large number of the enemy force was caught up in the blast.

It was an antiship missile. Starting with that first one, missiles inundated the enemy with second and third consecutive waves. Heat pulses from the explosion pressed toward Rentaro, and he protected his face from the splinters and dust that blew his way.

When he lifted his eyes, red flames were blooming in the night sky and hot

wind gusted against his cheek. The crimson tongues from hell billowed upward with a thunderous roar, and there was black smoke from the burned-up sky.

Two support fighter aircraft arrived at the battlefield late. Spitting out jet fire, the single-engine turbofan planes approached the battlefield at the speed of sound, crossing over them and letting loose five-hundred-pound guided bombs used for ground attacks. Heavy tips pointing downward, they sucked up the Gastrea on the ground, and more fire and heat from the explosions scattered around them.

The Gastrea troops who had been rushing in headlong slowed to a stop for the first time and gave off sounds of bewilderment and fear. Just then, there was another shower of regular bombs, demolishing the front lines.

The enemy was restless, and there were even those among them who had succumbed to their fear and were running backward toward their own troops. That was fine. If it turned into a stampede, it would be better for the humans.

Just then, Rentaro saw a mysterious sight and held his breath. In a corner of the enemy ranks, in a spot that was relatively well controlled, a giant Gastrea suddenly faded in. When Rentaro saw the silhouette of its rounded back with thin tentacles sprouting from it in random places, he was shocked. It was almost fifty meters in length.

No way… Is this Aldebaran?

With a wave of one of this giant silhouette's arms, it swung downward at the Gastrea trying to run away. The monsters that had been pierced by the arms didn't even know what hit them; they struggled and finally started to spasm in death throes. Aldebaran brought the bodies of its subordinates to its mouth, opened its giant mouth wide, and threw them in without hesitation.

Rentaro heard the dying cries of the Gastrea as they were ground to pieces, even though he shouldn't have been able to hear them. He resisted the urge to vomit.

Aldebaran was eating the other Gastrea that were on its side.

"Gahhhhhhhhhh!" Angered, Aldebaran howled into the sky. The remaining Gastrea that were just about to stampede froze in midstep. Finally, they slowly

returned to their positions and once more faced the civil officer troops.

Even their enemies were afraid of their commander, and were willing to struggle to the death on its orders.

Aldebaran was also focused on aiming for the self-defense force's fighter aircraft. They were under attack.

The flying-type Gastrea that had come to intercept the attack formed a large cloud to strike. The two fighter aircraft released air-to-air missiles. The spears of science from the four missiles ran into the wall made by the flying Gastrea and blossomed into flames. The sight of the countless Gastrea dropping from the sky as they screamed long screams made Rentaro's hairs stand on end, but he couldn't take his eyes off it for a moment.

However, the enemy was not to be taken lightly. The flying Gastrea had strength in numbers, and a few of them went through the middle of the flames to throw themselves at the jets with a high-pitched neigh, prepared to die.

One of the aircraft couldn't escape completely and was grazed on the edge of one wing, losing its balance and going into a tailspin as it fell. In the end, it couldn't recover its position and crashed into the ground.

The remaining aircraft charged the Gastrea. With a cross counter that did not take defense into consideration, it delivered a single courageous strike to Aldebaran. The fighter aircraft let loose a guided missile at the same time that Aldebaran stretched out a conspicuously long tentacle. The alloyed metal body was pierced by Aldebaran's tentacle, which went straight through the cockpit as it exploded. The pilot probably didn't even realize what had hit him as he left the world. And the five-hundred-pound guided missile that the aircraft had left used GPS guidance to make slight adjustments to its position as it fell and was sucked into Aldebaran's torso.

The next instant, there was a huge explosion, and Aldebaran's scream rang out.

When the flames from the explosion cleared and Rentaro could see again, he saw that the silhouette of Aldebaran was still, not moving an inch. It had completely lost its head and was bare to its abdomen.

“All right!”

But just then, Gado’s dispirited comment rang inside Rentaro’s head:

“Leader Satomi, Aldebaran is an immortal Gastrea. There is no way to kill it.”

Aldebaran’s body twitched and wings unfolded out of its torso, fluttering at high speed. It was moving without a head.

Rentaro looked on in wonderment. Its brains had been blown out. If Aldebaran was an organism that used nucleic acids as a base to replicate DNA to form proteins, then its regenerative abilities should have been greatly reduced, what with its heart and pulse stopped and its pupillary light reflex gone. It should have just been waiting for its inevitable death.

“No way…”

Was there really no way to defeat this thing?

His shock aside, a familiar scene repeated itself before him. The entirety of the Gastrea halted abruptly and retreated while protecting Aldebaran. The flap of its wings earlier had probably been to spread pheromones.

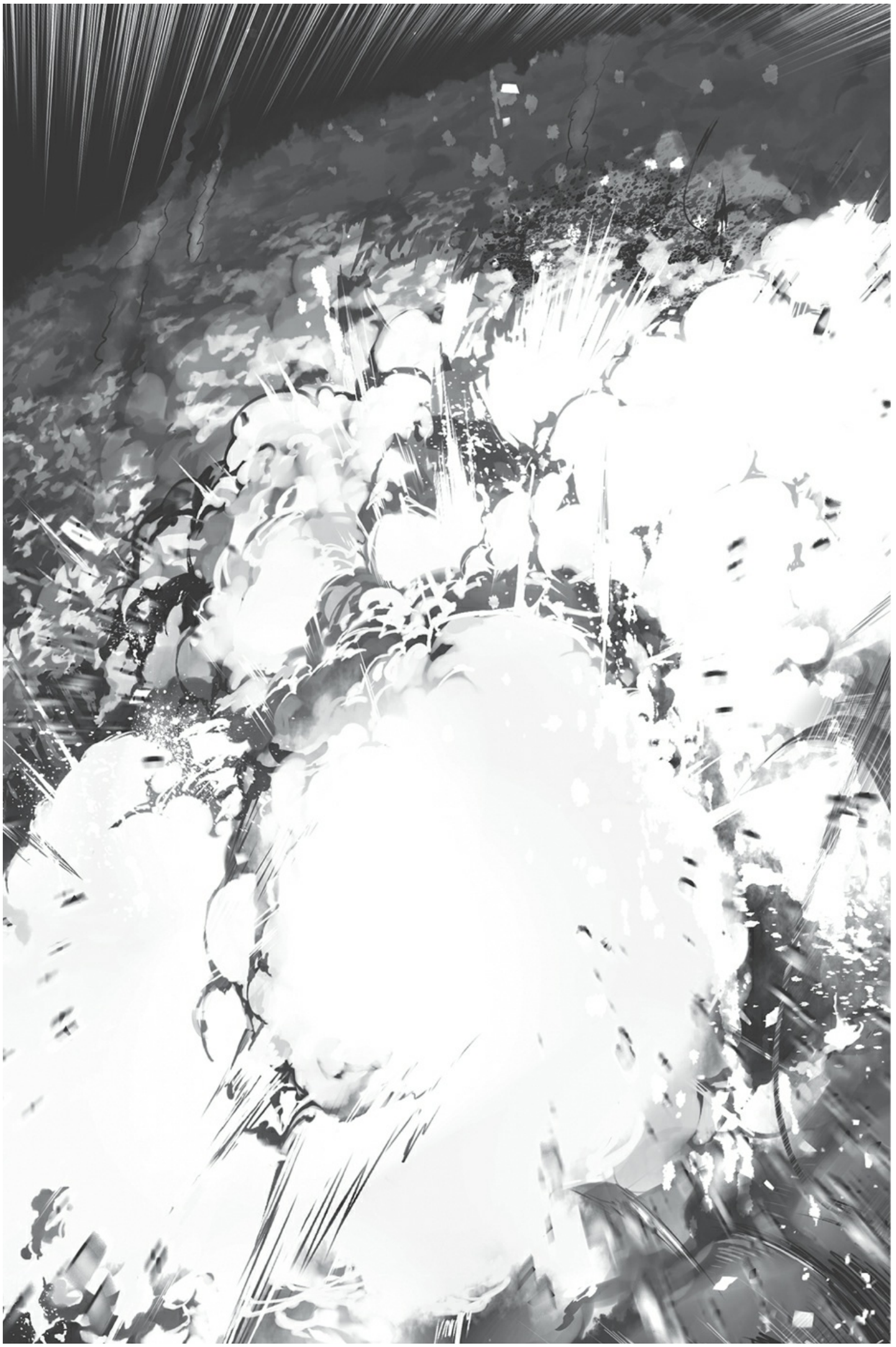
A mass of Gastrea troops left the Monolith and came toward Rentaro. He quickly dove into a dilapidated house nearby, removed a floorboard, and let the creatures pass him by. After waiting for the right time, he rushed out and ran back toward the civil officer base.

“Kisara!” Seeing her among a group of civil officers covered in wounds, he waved his hand as he ran toward her.

He could see Enju next to her, too; the girl noticed him at the same time. “Rentaro!”

“Enju!”

They hugged with such force that they almost knocked each other over. Rentaro embraced Enju tightly and buried his face in her neck.



The girl's arm went around his waist. "You idiot."

"Sorry, Enju. Really…I'm sorry." Regrets flowed up from the bottom of his heart. He should have explained the situation to Enju, at least. He really thought so now, after he had seen how painful it was to spend time apart.

"Why did you leave without informing me? I was worried." As she said that, she half-sobbed and punched his sides.

"Argh, that hurts, stop it. I'm injured there! Don't touch it."

"Satomi……?"

Pushing Enju away from him, Rentaro looked toward the voice and gulped. Kisara's black hair and white skin were covered with soot and blood, and she had a cut above her eyes that forced her left eye closed from blood. When he looked more carefully, he saw that Enju's clothes also had traces of cuts and tears all over them.

Even so, Kisara let her tears gather at the edge of her vision as she put a hand firmly on her hip and looked at him sharply. "Jeez, you're late!"

"Sorry."

Kisara looked like she was about to say more, but no more words came out. Clasping her hands in front of her chest like she was praying, she looked down, shoulders shaking.

Rentaro was racked with guilt and scratched his head, not knowing how to deal with it.

Just then, a voice called out, "Hey, isn't that Rentaro Satomi?" Rentaro raised his head as the surviving civil officers looked at him as if he had returned from Hades, surrounding him from far away.

He heard voices raise a commotion:

"I heard he'd been banished…"

"Then, the missiles that flew over were…"

"Did he defeat Pleiades and come back?"

"No way…"

From their reaction, he understood at once what the others had been told about his mission to subjugate Pleiades. He desperately controlled his expression to make sure his inner thoughts did not make it to his face. From their hollow eyes, he could tell that everyone was more exhausted than their visible wounds allowed. Thankfully, he still saw Tina, Tamaki, Yuzuki, and Shoma, but what was the deal with having their five-hundred-person-strong troops reduced to about sixty people before the second wave came?

He wanted this to be a joke. He wanted to hear the sound of footsteps bringing the remaining civil officers saying, “Don’t tell me you thought we died?” and laughing it off. He would feel annoyed for a moment, but then he would be grinning happily with them.

“Where’s…everyone else?” His voice sounded stiff, dry, and flat as he spoke.

Kisara wiped her eyes with her sleeve and looked at Rentaro solemnly. “Satomi…Leader Satomi.” Kisara saluted and looked at Rentaro sharply. “Commander Gado has died in battle.”

He felt like he had just been hit hard in the head. *Died? Gado did? The war veteran with an IP rank of 275* died*?*

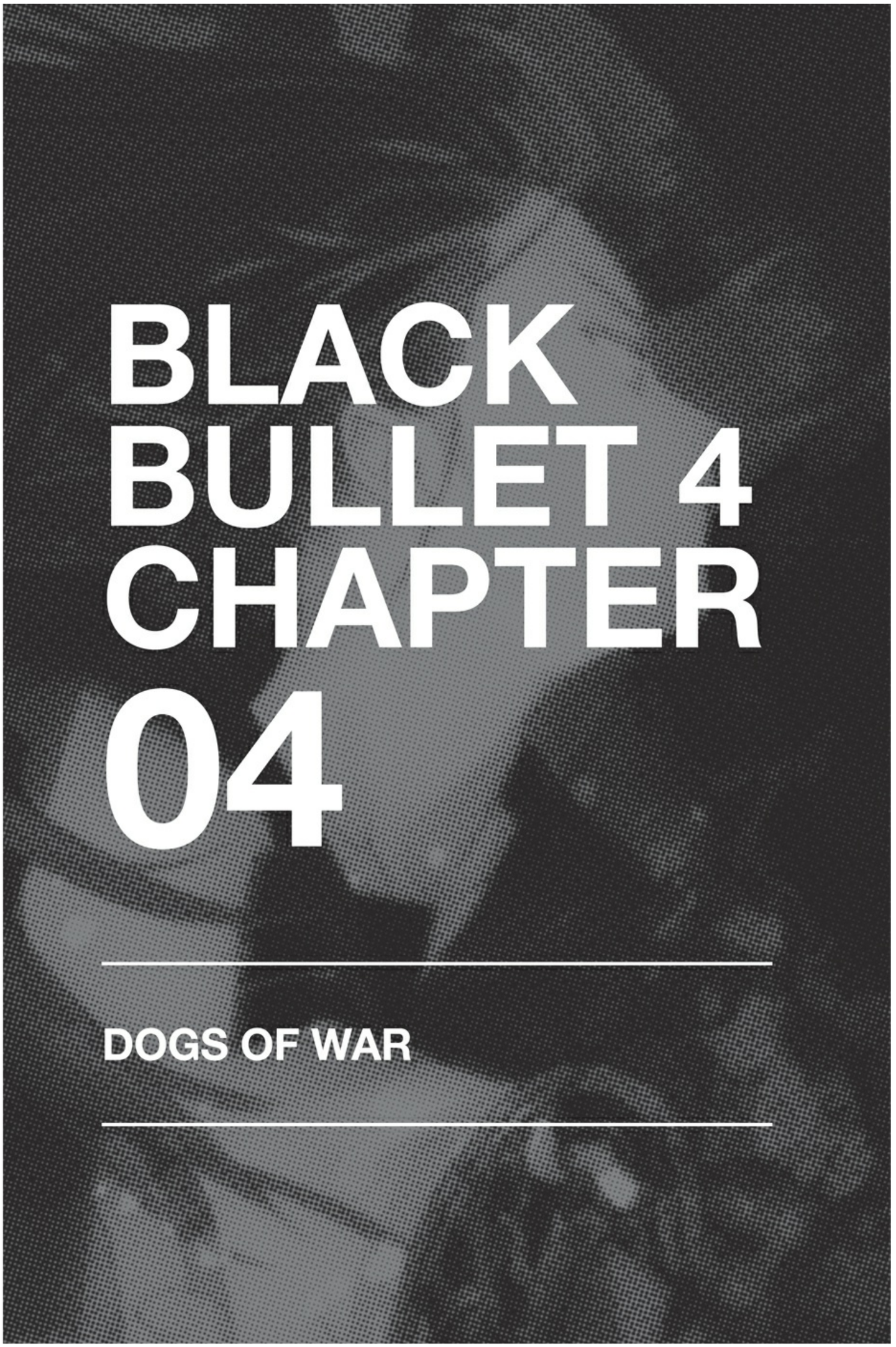
“According to the Adjuvant System in the civil officer manual, article 40, if the commander dies, then the authority to command the troops will pass to the civil officer with the next highest rank.”

“Then who’s in right now?” Rentaro asked.

All the Promoters and Initiators around them looked their way.

No way… Rentaro shook his head slowly as he backed away. *It’s impossible, Kisara. There’s no way I can do it.*

“From here on out, we will fight with you in command. Please lead us, Satomi.”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BULLET 4
CHAPTER
04
DOGS OF WAR

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CHAPTER 04

DOGS OF WAR

1

After getting proper treatment of his wound at the first-aid station that operated out of the school nurse's office, Rentaro could finally relax. When he was freed from being in constant fear for his life, the first things to attack him were lethargy and a sense of emptiness. The effects of the excessive amount of adrenaline wore off, and the sharp pain returned to his abdomen. But the deep emotions he felt at surviving passed, and he was soon filled with a different kind of nervousness.

He was reminded to stay in bed for at least a day after this, but he didn't have the time for that. He was now the leader of this worn-out group that could barely be called a troop, even if it hadn't quite sunk in yet.

Thanking Sumire, he left the nurse's office and walked alone along the nighttime street. Now that he had become the commander, there were a ton of things he had to do. However, there was one thing he had to check, even if it meant putting aside everything else.

Rentaro headed toward some facilities a little ways away from the school that were connected to the former first-aid station. When he told the person at the entrance why he was there, he was led through to a large hall. The room was spacious and dimly lit, and he occasionally heard sobbing.

Laid out in an orderly fashion were five rows of black body bags.

He thought they looked just like the rows of tuna at the wholesale fish market. He looked on with a strangely cold feeling, thinking that this would be his fate, too, if he died.

The health-care center had turned into a storage area for the bodies of civil officers and their support personnel who had died in action. The corpses should have been promptly sent back to the bereaved families, but after Aldebaran's second attack, the personnel who would have transported them got cold feet, and the spirits of those who defended their country were now sleeping together in a huddle with no one to care for them.

Because of the ashes from the Monolith covering the sky, temperatures had dropped dramatically, but it was actually still summer. That meant that the phenomenon called rigor mortis set in immediately after death, and it was hard to avoid the sour smell that filled the air and hit Rentaro's nose. The sound of shoes echoed shrilly on the linoleum floor, and the sound of the power generator in the room next door made the air vibrate slightly.

Finally, the person on duty led him to where he needed to go, and then Rentaro stood in front of a single corpse. When the person on duty checked the tab, he bowed once and left. Rentaro watched him go, then got on his knees and quietly unzipped the body bag.

Rentaro was greeted with muddy, wet eyes and a half-opened mouth. Compassion won over fear, and Rentaro looked at him face-to-face for a while. The man had lost both arms and legs, and Rentaro could see cruel cracks in his bright red exoskeleton, splattered with blood redder than red.

"I…didn't hate you, Gado." From what Rentaro had heard, Aldebaran's second attack had been aiming for the commander, Gado, from the start. The enemy troops used an extremely primitive form of organization with Aldebaran as the head, but in terms of base instincts, humans had not changed that much, either. The civil officer troops lacked even a standardized set of indispensable equipment for modern-day warfare, and they hadn't had time for training, either, so it could be said that they had no choice but to fight with a primitive form of organization.

The advantage was that the chain of command was simple, so it did not take long for orders to reach the soldiers at the end. The disadvantage was obvious—all the power was concentrated on the general, so if the general was out of commission, then the organization would simply collapse and everything would fall apart.

Apparently, Gado's squad was lured in and surrounded, and at the end of a hard, desperate fight, they were pulverized.

The civil officer troops didn't fall apart at that, but only because each and every civil officer was firmly aware of the fact that they were Tokyo Area's last stronghold.

Rentaro had a silent conversation with Gado. Even with all that had happened, Gado had an IP rank of 275. Rentaro could not imagine how much of a handicap the man had fighting with just one leg, but if Gado had been healthy, he would not have fallen behind even if he had been outnumbered.

Old or young, male or female, smart or foolish, good or bad—death did not discriminate. This world was fair to the point of being cruel. Nagamasa Gado had banished Rentaro Satomi and then had been forced into an inescapable situation. But Gado's actions had all been based on a certain kind of logic, and part of that was that he was constantly making decisions in an almost heartless manner. He had cast Rentaro away mechanically based on his own logic. However, that man had also met his fate by the same reckoning.

This was not the ending Rentaro had wanted. He had wanted to surprise this man by showing that he could come back alive from a mission he wasn't supposed to survive.

Rentaro turned his head to look at the rows of neatly lined up body bags. Their current combat power was a little over sixty civil officers who were up against one thousand, eight hundred Gastrea. They would not get any reinforcements. They had also run out of missiles and fighter aircraft. All of Tokyo Area was worn out, and it didn't matter what tactics they used—they were already facing certain defeat.

Aldebaran would come. It would definitely come one more time. Rentaro's intuition, which had already surpassed rhyme or reason, told him that he would not be able to avoid a final decisive battle against that thing.

The nihilist Sumire had often told him that there was no meaning to life, and that everything they did was just dancing on their graves. If that was the case, then was it complete coincidence that he was not already lined up alongside the rows of dead? Would the future change if he took command in Gado's place?

Rentaro shook his head silently. No, it was the same. Nothing would change.

It was then that he noticed that Gado's cloak had been taken off and folded. It wasn't like they were distributing mementos, but he thought to take something back with him, so he took that and turned around.

Suddenly, he stopped, noticing that someone was walking toward him from the front. He immediately realized that it was Gado's Initiator. Asaka Mibu, whose hands were covered in mud from picking golden-rayed lilies, hung her head dejectedly, walking with heavy steps. It seemed she had managed to survive, but she looked so dazed—like she had dropped her soul somewhere—that it was hard to say whether she could be described with the word *unharmed*.

When Asaka noticed Rentaro, she bowed and headed toward Gado's side. When Rentaro started walking again, he suddenly heard sobs coming from behind him and stopped.

Rentaro's hand tightened into a fist. He ran without looking back.

I'm not fit to be the commander.

2

Rentaro was still depressed as he took on the heavy responsibilities of *Commander*. He couldn't even tell if he didn't want to do it because he didn't think he could, or because he didn't think they could win, or if it was a combination of the two. Thinking to go back once to the hotel his adjuvant made camp in, he dragged his feet past what had once been a park and suddenly heard angry voices that made him raise his face.

Straining his eyes to look, he saw a crowd of civil officers off in the distance. There was so much murderous intent, it was as if someone had stirred up a hornet's nest. He could see Tamaki, Yuzuki, Enju, and Shoma. And in the middle of the uproar was a conspicuously tall masked man and a girl wearing a black dress.

Oh no, Rentaro thought, starting to run. They had followed him and descended upon the civil officer frontline base. It looked like before they could find Rentaro,

they had been found by other civil officers and had caused a commotion.

“Kagetane, Kohina!” Rentaro shouted.

The two of them noticed Rentaro, and Kagetane spread his arms benevolently. “There you are, my comrade. I was looking for you.”

Enju shot a look toward Rentaro, startled. “Rentaro! What does he mean, he was looking for you?”

“I’ll explain later, but he saved me.”

“Saved you?!” Enju’s voice cracked.

Just then, Kohina narrowed her eyes and stepped forward with flushed cheeks. “Enju, I missed you.” Drawing her black Varanium short swords, she licked a blade with her tongue. “Let’s cross swords, Enju. Okay?”

Just then, a shining thread wrapped around one of Kohina’s short swords and restrained its movement. Kohina stared in surprise.

“Wait a minute, you.” Stepping out to the front with her arms crossed and looking furious was none other than Yuzuki Katagiri. “You people are the enemy of all of us civil officers! Now that we know you’re alive, we can’t just let you leave.”

Kohina gave Yuzuki a bored sideways glance and then pulled the hem of Kagetane’s tailcoat. “Papa, these people are in the way. Can I kill them?”

Rentaro’s hair stood on end. If they went wild here, it would be trouble.

However, not even Kagetane would get into a brawl with this many civil officers, already surrounded on all sides. That was Rentaro’s way of figuring, anyway, but Kagetane betrayed his expectations and snapped his fingers. “Kohina, you can kill half of them.”

Raising clouds of dust, Kohina seemed to disappear, then appeared the next moment in front of Yuzuki’s eyes.

“Wha—?!”

“You know, you’re kind of strong, but—”

Yuzuki threw up her arm suddenly in defense, but Kohina’s short sword went

past that to pierce Yuzuki's side. Kohina continued on to ram her, knocking Yuzuki off her feet and then treading on the overturned Yuzuki's abdomen with her feet.

Cracks radiated out on the ground, and there was the sound of air being squeezed out as Yuzuki spit blood. "Gah…!"

"It's not over yet," vowed Kohina.

An Initiator with an IP rank of 1,850 was defeated in seconds. However, there was no time to be surprised as two Initiators struck at Kohina from both sides.

Kohina spun with the speed of a tornado and slashed the stomach of the Initiator on the left and the tendon of the Initiator on the right and then kicked both to send them flying. The two of them pounded into the ground, outside of the crowd of people. She was amazingly strong.

"Let go of Yuzuki, you little—" Tamaki rushed out, pulling the trigger of a large revolver.

"It's no use. Imaginary Gimmick!" A repulsion field spread out around Kagetane, who had stepped between them. The bullet Tamaki fired hit the dome-shaped field and ricocheted with a thunderous roar.

Tamaki's gun shook in his hand. "Wh-what the hell… It was a bullet from a .454 Casull, you know!"

Kagetane chuckled. "Too bad!"

This is bad. At this rate… As Rentaro rushed out in a rage, he suddenly felt tremendous killing intent coming from somewhere.

"Please get out of the way," said a low voice, and the civil officers stopped in their tracks. There was a commotion as the crowd parted, and a single Initiator walked toward them. She held two fully automatic Glock guns in her hands, and her platinum blond hair was half-ruffled. "Release Yuzuki this minute. I'm getting angry…"

"Tina!" said Rentaro.

Apparently comprehending her unusual presence, Kohina took her foot off of Yuzuki. "Oh? You look strong. What's your rank?"

Tina said her rank quietly in a voice only Kohina could hear.

The instant she heard it, Kohina's eyes grew wide, and she muttered, "Interesting." She turned to Kagetane. "Papa, I'm going to kill her! I'll definitely kill her! Even if you tell me no, I'll definitely kill her!" Kohina abandoned the sword that had been wrapped in thread and pulled out a new one from her waist, crossing her swords and lowering her hips.

At the same time, two Shenfields spilled out of Tina's sleeves and danced in the air.

"You're not a close-combat Initiator, are you?" said Kohina.

"What if I'm not?" Tina replied.

"You can't win. Not someone like you."

Tina looked momentarily confused but then soon shook her head. "What a joke."

"Then why don't we give it a try?"

The murderous intent and fighting spirit clashed, turning the air explosive.

Shoot, Rentaro thought. Even if he ran out himself, there was no way he could stop them. However, he didn't expect a second intruder to appear just then. He heard the ringing of a sword departing its sheath and saw skirts fluttering gently.

"That's enough." Kisara suddenly appeared between Kagetane and Kohina and flipped her long hair. She had an eye patch protecting the left eye she'd damaged in the recent fight. "If you insist on continuing this, I will intervene in the fight."

Kagetane drew his gun from its holster and pointed it at Kisara's brow. "Oh dear, lovely Miss President. Do you remember me?"

"Yes, of course. It's been a while, Kagetane Hiruko."

Kagetane held his mask as he chuckled. "But your joke makes me laugh. You will intervene in the fight? What of it? I am the one who will destroy the world. No one can stop me."

Just as Kagetane put his finger on the trigger of his Beretta, Kohina suddenly

realized something, and the color drained from her face as she screamed. “Papa, no! She’s the most dangerous out of everyone here!”

Kagetane looked at Kohina in disbelief and then returned his gaze to Kisara.

Kagetane held his weapon at the ready, and Kisara had her hand similarly on her scabbard. Invisible sparks flung between the two.

Rentaro didn’t know how Kagetane judged Kisara’s strength, but surprisingly, Kagetane was the one to back off first. Kohina even looked regretfully at Enju and Tina and sheathed her short swords.

Rentaro didn’t understand what had happened. Even though Kohina had been even more eager to challenge Tina after learning her rank, she panicked the instant Kisara said she was going to intervene…

Wait a minute. Does that mean—

“My friend.” His train of thought broken, Rentaro looked up to see Kagetane smiling softly as he held his mask. “I wanted to test the strength of your adjuvant. Sorry.” He chuckled.

Rentaro didn’t say anything as he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. After encountering Kagetane in the forest and somehow or other working together to defeat Pleiades, Rentaro thought that maybe even someone like Kagetane could change his ways for the better. However, in the end, even as Tokyo Area was on the brink of destruction from the approaching Aldebaran, this pair was more concerned with pissing contests.

After glaring at Kagetane silently, Rentaro exchanged glances with Tamaki and nodded once. Tamaki lent a shoulder to his little sister, Yuzuki, and hurriedly took her to the relief squad. In the end, neither Enju nor Rentaro, nor the white-coated Shoma, had found an opportunity to join the fight.

Hmm? Rentaro felt like something was off and looked around him, realizing that there was an Initiator he hadn’t seen this whole time. Casually looking around him, he walked to where Shoma was.

“Shoma, bro, where’s Midori?”

A startled nervousness spread on the faces of the members of the adjuvant,

and Rentaro felt uncomfortable at that baffling answer. “Enju, did…did something happen?”

Enju looked down, not meeting Rentaro’s eyes.

“Satomi, there’s something I need to tell you.” Solemnly, Shoma opened his mouth slowly and spoke.

And then Rentaro understood why Enju had been silent.

“No way…”

Kisara shook her head gloomily. “Anyway, you should go see her. You’ll still make it. She was waiting for you to come.”

3

Rentaro went through the dense forest and came once again to Central Heights Hotel, careful as he went through the entryway with the collapsed ceiling and up the metal spiral staircase to the second floor. Relying on memory, he stood in front of room 201, stopping his hand just as he was about to knock.

Rentaro realized that he still did not have his feelings in order. What kind of face was he supposed to show in front of her? There was nothing more worthless than an adjuvant leader who wasn’t there when it really mattered. He couldn’t complain if she blamed him.

“Is someone there?” He heard a feeble voice call out from the other side of the door.

Rentaro prepared himself and exhaled from his nose. He twisted the knob and entered quietly, but the screech of a rusted hinge mixed with the stagnant air inside the room.

In the orange light of a silently burning lantern, he saw Midori Fuse lying in the bed on the right. Next to her was a water pitcher and cup. When she saw Rentaro, she hurriedly took the pointed hat from the side table and put it on to hide her cat ears.

The light was only shining on half of her face, but she was sweating profusely,

and her cheeks were flushed. At first glance, it seemed like she had just caught a cold, but Initiators were protected from a variety of illnesses in exchange for the corrosion rate that bound their bodies, so of course that was not the case.

Rentaro brought over the stool in front of the vanity and sat down next to Midori. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m all right, Leader.” She tried to sit up and bow politely, but Rentaro hurriedly kept her down. The shoulder he held rose and fell with small movements, and she was panting, her pulse beating hotly. To Midori right now, even that small feat was difficult.

“More importantly, are you really…?” Rentaro asked as he helped her lay down again.

She smiled faintly, as if answering a question about the weather. “Yes, I’m sorry. I fell behind. The Gastrea got me, and now I cannot move my body as I would like.”

He couldn’t help but feel compassion for the conditions of how she fell in battle. Alone and unaided, surrounded on all sides with the enemy closing in…it would have been possible for her to survive if she and Shoma had been able to keep their usual formation and focus on defense, but…

Midori had seen an Initiator in trouble during battle. Apparently, they had only bumped into each other in the camp and exchanged silent bows, but because they were both shy, they had never actually exchanged words. But when Midori found out that girl had gotten separated from her Promoter and had lost both her legs and was just abandoned in the middle of the battlefield, she didn’t think about anything else but rushing in to rescue her.

What was frightening was how elaborate the Gastrea’s tactics had been. At the very least, the Gastrea’s mind had been developed enough to calculate profit and loss beyond immediate kill of the prey it had brought down. They had waited for another to rescue their haul, and thereby get both at once.

Just as Midori rushed in to comfort the girl whose name she did not even know, the sandlike ground caved in under them and hollowed out into a funnel as they watched. At the end of the upside-down cone, a repulsive Gastrea with a snapping lower jaw appeared. It was probably an ant lion larva Gastrea, but its

form had changed so much that she couldn't be sure.

A minute passed. In that time, her arms and legs were being pulled down by the sand as she slipped down, and her movements were being stopped by neurotoxins as she was injected with the Gastrea virus.

Organisms that had turned into Gastrea grew something called a virus pocket somewhere in their bodies packed with the virus, and they injected it into their opponents in one way or another to turn them into Gastrea, too. There were, on average, over two hundred million Gastrea viruses in each milliliter of the virus pocket. A normal person would have been turned into a Gastrea in no time, but it was unknown what would have happened to Midori if Shoma had rescued her even a second later.

All that could be found of the Initiator Midori had tried to save on the battlefield were traces that looked like scraps of food, and there was no way to know exactly where she was. In addition, according to Sumire's close inspection, Midori had a Gastrea virus corrosion rate so hopeless that she hesitated to even say it.

And Midori herself did not know this. "Leader, I'll get better soon and be able to fight again, right?"

Rentaro looked down, unable to look straight at her face.

"Kill that girl." Involuntarily, the masked man's baritone voice ran through his head. Those were the words of Kagetane, who had been eavesdropping when they were talking about the circumstances of Midori's situation earlier.

"It's over for her. Even if you kept her alive, she would just slow you down. No, she would definitely get in the way. You should send her off swiftly before she turns into a Gastrea. That is your first duty as the new commander."

When Kagetane murmured that, Kisara flared up fiercely. "You can't. I'm against it. If we keep Midori stable…at best, she could still live for another month."

Kagetane shook his head in disgust. "This is ridiculous. Are you really going to face Aldebaran with the nonsensical illusion of friendship?"

Kisara turned once and glared sharply at Rentaro. "Satomi, you better not

listen to what a guy like this says. If you kill Midori, I'll scorn you forever."

"Satomi, kill her. In the past, we fought because I wanted to throw the world into confusion, while you wanted to maintain world order. You won. This is the world you desired. You must deal with the consequences."

The two of them glared Rentaro down, making him feel extremely conflicted as he left.

I will… I will…

"What's the matter, Leader?" Midori's voice brought him back to himself, and he shook his head listlessly.

"It's…nothing…" Rentaro put his hand behind his back and checked the position of his XD gun.

Midori had no way of knowing Rentaro's thoughts as she poured water from the pitcher into the cup and slid her finger around the wet brim. "Leader, I have a favor to ask of you."

"A favor?"

"Yes. I'm having trouble feeling my extremities… Will you play along for a while?" Saying that, without waiting for an answer, she stuck her arm out horizontally, still lying down. And then, she slowly closed her eyes. "Leader, please take hold of any finger you'd like."

Rentaro look suspiciously at the outstretched hand but gently took hold of her middle finger.

"Just now, did you touch…my thumb?"

Rentaro was taken aback. There were no uniform symptoms for Initiators whose corrosion levels were close to the borderline. There were those who turned into Gastrea while in a deep coma, but on the other hand, there were those who turned mad in the midst of agonizing pain, losing all emotion as they turned into Gastrea. There was also the unfortunate case of the girl Rentaro had helped die in the past, Kayo Senju, who looked on clearheaded as she watched herself helplessly turn into a Gastrea.

Rentaro closed his eyes and murmured, “God.” Midori’s encroachment was starting at her extremities in the most tragic way. And she would likely remain clearheaded like Kayo as her brain stopped being able to control her muscles and her motor neurons died out. Her whole body would become numb, but her cerebral function would remain clear and she could watch herself as she succumbed to the illness.

Now that it had gotten to this point, there was no way to save her. After this, the Gastrea virus could advance easily without using any more strength, and at the end of nursing her in vain, she would turn into a Gastrea. The Gastrea virus was called an invincible virus that did not respond to any interventions by modern medicine, so there was no way to escape inevitable death.

Rentaro quietly changed his grip to her thumb without her noticing. “You got it right.”

Midori opened her eyes slightly and tilted her head with a wry smile. “Really?”

“Huh?”

“Really? You didn’t cheat just now, did you?”

He felt a second of intense panic. He desperately controlled his gaze so that he would not look shifty-eyed as he squeezed out, “I didn’t cheat.”

Midori lowered her eyes, which had a tinge of pain in them. After that, she deliberately took off her hat, revealing the cat ears that grew on her head because of the Gastrea factor. “Because of these ears, no one ever needed me. Not even my mother, who gave birth to me.”

“Gastrea Shock, huh…?”

“Yes.”

He had guessed already, so he was not especially surprised to hear this. It was said that the development of a child’s personality was greatly dependent on environment. A child who was greatly oppressed while growing up would rebel. A child who was ignored would act up in order to get attention. Midori’s timid and meek personality was probably because she was raised in a way that thoroughly denied her existence.

“But then, Shoma came to need me. And then, so did you…” Midori stopped talking for a while and looked up at Rentaro, a dignified look in her eye. “I can still fight. Please let me fight.”

Rentaro silently shook his head. “It would make me and Shoma the happiest if you rested and got better quickly right now.”

For some reason, the saddest smile he had ever seen appeared on Midori’s face. “I heard that you were promoted to commander. Congratulations, Leader.”

Rentaro looked down and dropped his gaze to his knees. “……I can’t do it.” It was something he couldn’t even confess to Enju, but for some mysterious reason, it came out honestly in front of Midori. “I can’t handle it. No one will listen to me.”

“Because you’re still young?”

Rentaro nodded, and Midori smiled faintly but broadly.

“Then you really must be the commander, Leader. You should be happy.”

“Happy?”

“Yes. If your age is the only thing that is being emphasized, then it could be said that you have fulfilled all the other requirements.”

“You’re giving me too much credit. I’m not who you think I am.” *That’s right. I even want to run away right now. I want to push the job of commander onto someone else.* Once he put it into words, the insincere voices curled up in his mind came gushing out one after another, and there was no end to them.

The fist he made on his knees shook slightly.

A warm hand came and gently covered his own. He looked at the girl in surprise, and found her looking at him straight-on.

She was a strange girl… He had never had a proper conversation with her, but unexpectedly, it seemed possible that she was not an Initiator who depended on Shoma one-sidedly.

“Hey, what was the scent divination you were talking about when we first met?” said Rentaro.

“Huh?”

“Remember? When you introduced yourself, you said, ‘my special ability is scent divination.’ What is that?”

Midori seemed to understand and put her hands in front of her chest, stroking them. “Oh, it’s because I’m a cat. So I have a pretty good nose.” Midori closed her eyes and showed him her nose twitching. “After smelling a lot of different people, I can tell each person’s unique smell. When I used that as a kind of fortune-telling, it got an unexpectedly good response from the people around me.”

“Really? Then, what kind of smell do I have?”

For some reason, Midori looked up at him timidly. “You won’t get mad?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“You smell like destruction.”

His heart leapt. “I smell…like destruction? Does destruction even have a smell?”

Midori also shook her head, bewildered. “I don’t know. This is just something instinctive, so it’s not like I’m thinking about it when I say it.”

Silence descended. Midori gulped down the water in the glass. The ice slid down inside the glass with a clatter. “Another thing, about Miss Tendo…”

“Kisara?”

Midori seemed to resolve herself as she looked at him. “Please be careful, Leader. She smells strongly of destruction. She seems to be easily drawn to darkness.”

Rentaro was at a loss for words. “What does that mean…?”

“But if you’re the commander, then I’m not worried. I’m sure you will do well. I am relieved.” Their conversation seemed slightly off, but Midori forced herself up, put her hat back on, and stuck her feet into her shoes.

“H-hey.”

“I’m just going out for a while. To the restroom. Don’t tell me you’re going to

follow me?”

Rentaro groaned.

Midori smiled shyly, put her hand on the door, and turned her back to him. But then her hand stopped abruptly, and she suddenly turned back with an urgent expression on her face. “Leader! Um, I…!”

However, she didn’t finish the rest of her sentence, no matter how long he waited. She forced her emotions back, looking like she was in pain, and then her usual calm self returned.

Her profile had a quiet resignation to it. “I might take a little longer in the restroom.”

Saying that, she left the room.

She never returned.

“Hey, Midori…!”

“Midori!”

There were a number of thin bright bands of light from the flashlights cutting through the darkness, exposing the uneven terrain.

Enju and Kisara cried out earnestly, but there was no answer.

Rentaro felt his feet sink slightly into the damp, muddy ground as he called out to Midori, who was nowhere to be found.

“Would she really be in a place like this?” Kisara asked Rentaro in irritation.

“But this is the only place we haven’t looked yet.” Rentaro checked his watch and cursed. It was 11 p.m. They had already been searching for an hour. He heard voices and saw lights here and there in the distance; it was almost a mountain manhunt. He didn’t think that she would be in a forest like this, but since this was the only place left by process of elimination, he was hoping against hope.

A three-forked road appeared out of the darkness in front of him. “Enju, go left. Kisara, go right.”

They nodded at each other, and then Rentaro took the path in front of him. If

Midori had already released her power, she could be long gone from their search area. But why in the world would she do that? Rentaro was filled with an unknown impatience and fear, and he practically ran as he called out into the dark, but his voice was almost immediately swallowed up by the darkness. His feelings of futility increased, and his side started hurting with a different kind of ominous premonition.

He was pushing his way through the deep grove of trees and halfway up the slope of the mountain when he slipped unexpectedly.

Cursing, his vision spun. He stretched out his hand, struggling to stop slipping somehow. He fell with a lump of earth, and when he finally stopped rolling, he stood as he spat the mud out from his mouth, looking around him. He had apparently fallen into a crater-shaped depression that was filled with a light mist.

And there she was.

“Midori!”

He hurried toward her, only to stop, immediately sensing that something was wrong.

Beyond the mist, the girl was sitting with her back leaned against the trunk of a white Japanese birch tree. Her head hung low, and she showed no sign of responding to his voice. She also did not look like she was sleeping. Her pointed hat had blown away, exposing the cat ears that she was so shy about showing other people.

Rentaro took one more step and noticed that something red had splattered on the white birch tree behind her back. “Mido…ri…?”

There was no answer. His arms and legs started shaking on their own. He didn’t want to see it or know what had happened. Fighting desperately against the feeling, his legs seemed to belong to something else as they moved toward the girl.

His legs stopped in front of the girl. Her sleepy-looking, half-closed eyes did not reflect anything of this world anymore. Her gaze was still, and even when he shined a light into them, he could see no reflex to prove that she was alive. From her mouth, red blood had mixed with her saliva, dragging a long thread down

like a weight. From her mouth to the back of her medulla oblongata was a small, round hole. The impact of the sight completely overshadowed the automatic pistol that lay on the ground next to her, making it look small in comparison.

Next to her was a scrap of paper that said, “I do not want to be a burden, so I will die. Please take care of Tokyo Area.”

Rentaro fell to his knees with his eyes still open wide. “It’s…my fault…”

“Really? You didn’t cheat just now, did you?” When he held her finger and realized that she had lost feeling in her left hand, Rentaro lied right away. But then, when she asked him this question, he panicked for a moment. That was when she understood from Rentaro’s reaction that she was beyond saving and resolutely decided to die.

What the hell was “*It would make me and Shoma the happiest if you rested and got better quickly right now*”? She had seen right through Rentaro’s empty lies. That’s why she had smiled at him so sadly.

He remembered the sight of the eight of them promising to return alive.

It seemed so far in the past.

When she had left her room, she had turned around and started to say something, but in the end, she left without finishing her sentence. What in the world had she wanted to say?

He could never hear her answer to that question now.

Come on, smile, Rentaro Satomi.

With this, you were able to get rid of the baggage that was getting in the way of your adjuvant without dirtying your hands.

With this, you didn’t have to kill Midori and make Kisara scorn you, or be laughed at by Kagetane for not being able to kill her.

Isn’t this best conclusion you could’ve had? Come on, smile.

Rentaro hit the trunk of the tree as hard as he could with his fist and looked up into the sky.

“God damnnn iiiiiiiit!!!”

"……"

Shoma leaned over and looked at her condition for a while, then gently closed her eyelids and used her hat to cover her face. He tilted his head back and faced the sky, pressing on his eyes with his hands. "…I was empty. When I met Midori, she was empty, too. We were the same. That's why we worked together. It was a contract to fill each other's loneliness."

Rentaro couldn't bear it any longer and cast down his eyes. He wasn't sure if he should tell everyone in the adjuvant about her death or not. But in any case, he thought her Promoter at least should know the truth, so he had brought Shoma here.

Shoma looked at Rentaro. "Satomi, let's tell the others she ran away and hide the fact that she died. Everyone would be too shaken."

"Shoma, man…" He had been ready to accept any type of scolding. But what was with Shoma's reaction? Rentaro's heart would have felt lighter if Shoma had just told Rentaro off with all his might. If it had been Enju lying there in this transformed state, Rentaro would have killed whoever was there with him, even if he knew he was just venting.

But Shoma shook his head. "I really should have been the one to help her to die. I, her partner…"

"Shoma, what was the emptiness you were talking about earlier…?"

Shoma looked down, sorrowfully. "I quit the Tendo Style, remember? I was expelled."

Rentaro was astonished. *Expelled? The brilliant student that Kisara and I looked up to was expelled?*

"Satomi, you saw it, too, didn't you? That time Kisara made a mistake and allowed a Gastrea to attack, and I jumped in to save her."

"…Yeah." The *Rokuro Kabuto* that Shoma had used had not only killed the pill bug Gastrea but had also made his opponent's body explode and scatter in all directions.

The essence of the Tendo Style was to use a focused power to defeat and

incapacitate the opponent, so destroying organs and other such cruel techniques were not expected. However, the technique Shoma used was obviously a killing technique to which he had modified and added his own style.

“I strayed from the straight path. That’s why I was expelled. I was betrayed by the Tendo Style that I had believed in and got lost by the wayside. That’s also why I disguised myself as a civil officer.”

Rentaro didn’t say anything.

“According to Master Sukekiyo, if I continued like this, I would use my power for evil. That’s why I’m actually forbidden from using the Tendo techniques themselves.”

“That’s ridiculous. Kisara and I both know that you wouldn’t do that.”

Shoma lifted the corner of his mouth just a little, looking happy. “I don’t know what’ll happen in the future. I don’t think God knows, either.”

“Shoma, man, I’m so sorry… This was my fault.”

“It wasn’t you who killed Midori, it was the Gastrea. If you want to grieve over her death, then swear right here, right now that you will defeat Aldebaran and save Tokyo Area.” Shoma silently stretched his arm out to Rentaro. “Stand up, Satomi. You’re the commander. If you don’t do it, then it’ll be Tokyo Area’s turn next. Midori’s death was no more than a sign. More gruesome deaths will be strewn around. You must stop Tokyo Area from becoming a sea of blood. You’re going to do it.”

Rentaro’s soul trembled. Even though Shoma had just lost his Initiator, who was like a part of him, he had not been overcome by resentment or sadness; instead, he’d told Rentaro what needed to be done. He was the proper successor to the Tendo Martial Arts, after all.

Rentaro closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled. Then, he slowly opened his eyes and tightly grasped Shoma’s outstretched arm.

His heart had decided.

Checking his watch, he saw that Japan had started a new day without him noticing. Tomorrow, construction of the new Monolith would begin. However,

since the danger of Aldebaran coming back to make it collapse again even after they finished building it remained, he needed to defeat it with his own two hands, after all.

It was starting. The last day. The day of the final decisive battle.

Rentaro took one last look at Midori and then started walking without looking back again.

The Third Kanto Battle had claimed another victim. Rentaro wouldn't allow it to claim any more.

4

Early the next morning, Rentaro put his hands on the washstand of the dimly lit public bathroom and stared at the partially clouded-over surface of the mirror. Amid the countless cracks on the mirror's surface were reflected many Rentaros with grim expressions.

The words Kagetane Hiruko said in the forest the day before yesterday crossed his mind.

"I can see the mask you wear, you know. The guardian *mask you wear when interacting with your Initiator, the* Tendo Civil Security Agency Employee *mask you wear when you work as an employee of that female boss of yours, and the* facing the enemy *mask you're wearing now with me. Aren't they all different Rentaro Satomis?"*

Around the world, there were a number of ceremonies and rituals held by people of different races and ethnicities that involved the wearing of masks. When people wore masks, the lines between reality and illusion, gods and humans, life and death all became blurred, allowing them to believe that they could become something different from themselves.

If that's the case, then I'll become the civil officer troop commander, Rentaro Satomi, right now.

He told this over and over to the Rentaro Satomi in the mirror, imagining that

he was putting on a cold mask.

“Satomi, it’s time.” When Rentaro looked toward the voice, he saw Kisara standing in the entrance of the bathroom.

“What about the thing I asked for?”

Kisara glanced at Rentaro’s remade jacket under her armpit with unease. “Are you really going to do it?”

“Of course. Stay next to me, Kisara. All right, let’s go,” he said, urging Kisara on and trying to go outside. But something seemed to be bothering Kisara that she just had to get out, and she stopped, looking up at Rentaro through her lashes.

“Um, you know, Satomi…”

“Hmm?”

“Satomi, have you noticed? You have a really scary expression on your face right now.”

The civil officers who had been gathered without explanation early in the morning and then made to wait in vain were obviously irritated. And that irritation reached its peak just as Rentaro took the stage with Kisara accompanying him.

“Hey, that’s…”

“That’s Commander Gado’s…”

“What the hell?” Rentaro could hear similar complaints all over the place.

Rentaro allowed Gado’s cloak with the troop crest to undulate, blowing in the wind as he walked in front of them to stand at the podium. He glared over the gathered civil officers, sighing inwardly without letting it show in his face.

Their numbers were sparse, and more than angry, they looked exhausted. Rentaro had heard ahead of time that they only had a little more than sixty people, but of those, there were hardly any who were uninjured. Their hearts were anywhere but here, and they were far from being unified. They couldn’t do anything with their anger and would do anything to vent, so they followed the closest thing that wanted them. They did not even seem to have the desire to win.

I see. So this is an army that would face certain defeat, Rentaro thought.

When he looked around, he saw Enju and the Katagiri siblings watching over him with concerned expressions.

“I’m Rentaro Satomi, and I will command in place of Commander Gado, who died in battle.”

Immediately after he spoke, angry voices flew about, booing and jeering. Rentaro could hardly bear to listen:

“You can’t take the place of Commander Gado!”

“Get off the stage!”

“If you’re gonna stick out that face, then I’m outta here.”

Just then, someone with a conspicuously loud voice appeared and shouted, “Hey, everyone!” It was a Promoter in his mid-thirties, one who was barely injured. He was probably the type who ran away right when the battle started and didn’t actually fight that much.

His face, including his nose, was flat. His head stuck out in the back, making it look like an inverted triangle. Was this what was called an expressionless face? He was a boring man with a boring face.

Said face turned red like a monkey’s as he jeered. “We can’t follow orders from someone like this. It’s all over for Tokyo Area. It’s over. If that’s the case, then don’t you want to go home to your family and loved ones and spend your last days with them, everyone?”

As the man stirred them up, other civil officers murmured their agreement. The man certainly had a point. With the daily reports, the whole world already knew that Tokyo Area was losing. The price of any and all the stocks on the Tokyo Area exchange had dropped so low that they were like scraps of paper. Interest rates for government bonds went up suddenly, and to make up for that, the yen suddenly became extremely weak. Despite all this, before the Third Kanto Battle, Tokyo Area had been considered a strong country with a safe haven currency, with its prosperous Varanium exports and track record of defeating the Zodiac Scorpion.

All the rich and famous had long flown to other areas or countries, and no one in the world thought the civil officers would win. It was a hard situation to remain hopeful in.

The man continued shouting. “Hey, let’s all indulge ourselves together. It’s not like there’s anyone who can stop us. The new commander’s so scared he can’t even talk.” The man stuck out his middle finger at Rentaro. “Hey, you. Try saying something.”

“Shut up,” said Rentaro.

“Huh?” At first, the man was taken aback, but the next instant, he looked at his supporters around him and started to smile with contempt. “Hey, you heard that, didn’t you? He said, ‘Shut up,’” the man scoffed.

“Kisara, I’m going to borrow this.” Saying that, Rentaro didn’t wait for an answer as he drew the murderous blade Yukikage.

“Hey, wait—” offered Kisara, but he left her behind as he jumped off the stage and went near the man.

The crowd of people parted briefly, and the man snorted. “What do you want? If you’re gonna do it, go ahead and try, you lily-livered—”

Before he finished talking, Rentaro casually stuck the Japanese blade into the man’s shoulder.

The air around them froze. There was the sound of someone gulping. The frozen man turned his head, trembling with fear, and looked with disbelief at the naked sword sticking out of his shoulder. “Gyahhhhhhhhhhh!!!”

After Rentaro stared down at the man rolling on the ground with cold eyes, he slowly looked at around him. “Does anyone else have any questions?”

The crowd drew back with a stir. The scornful voices stopped. Even Enju’s eyes were wide at the sudden change in him.

A Promoter with a bandanna seemed on the verge of tears as he said plaintively, “Why us?!”

“Because there’s no one else but us,” Rentaro answered.

“There’s no way we have enough people with these numbers!”

“If we don’t have enough people, then we will add some to our number.”

The man was about to laugh at the impossibility of it, and smiled stiffly. “Where would we find people like that? Don’t tell me you’re going to recruit the doctors and suppliers deployed to us?”

“There are people. Over there.” Saying that, Rentaro jerked his chin, and everyone looked in the direction he indicated. And then groans of surprise could be heard here and there.

“Wait, don’t tell me you—” The man’s face was pale as it turned from the gym back to Rentaro.

“That’s right. The injured.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There are people whose ears or arms and legs have been blown off in there, you know.”

“But they aren’t dead. If we lose this fight, everyone’s going to die anyway. And there are those who are faking illness because they don’t want to fight. We’ll take all of them and add another forty people.”

The man’s face beaded with sweat. “Y-you’re crazy. You’re insane! Hey, everyone, why aren’t you saying anything? The new commander’s out of his mind!”

That man looked behind Rentaro and a grin appeared on his face. “Chikaze! Kill him!”

Rentaro turned reflexively and saw the muzzle of an AK-47 assault rifle. The girl pulled the trigger, and with flashy muzzle fire, 7.6-mm bullets rushed at Rentaro in a fully automatic sweep.

Right before they hit Rentaro, there was a thunderous sound, and a bluish-white phosphorescence repelled all the bullets, sending them in all directions. Rentaro protected his face from the scalding wind pressure and opened his eyes slightly. “Kagetane, huh?”

The coattails of the mysterious masked man standing in front of Rentaro fluttered in the wind.

The assault rifle fell to the ground with a clang, and the girl called Chikaze held

both arms up in surrender. At the girl's neck was Kohina's short sword, which had cut a thin line into the skin.

In the midst of the frozen spectators, Kagetane slowly turned off the field and spread his arms dramatically. "Kohina and I will also put ourselves under Satomi's command. Do you still think we don't have enough people?"

The crowd trembled with fear. "No way, that terrorist…?"

"He was formerly ranked 134…"

Rentaro glared at Kagetane spitefully. "What's with this turn of events?"

"Don't you need my help, my comrade?" Kagetane chuckled, holding down his mask, as Rentaro glared at him coldly.

"I can trust you, right, Joker?"

"Leave it to me, King."

Rentaro nodded once and then threw out an even colder glare at the civil officers. "That's how it is. If you try to run away or cause trouble, then you will be eliminated. After this, anyone who points a sword at me or attacks me will be eliminated. I'm not as soft as Gado. I will give you orders later. That is all. Dismissed."

Rentaro left with a wave of his cloak.

"Wait a minute, Satomi!" He walked a little farther before turning around to see Kisara, as expected. From her indignant eyes, it was clearer than the sun that she was not feeling kindly toward him.

"Why did you do something like that? Making people obey you in such a violent way. Everyone's afraid of you now."

"That's good."

"What?"

Rentaro turned his back toward Kisara again and closed his eyes without speaking. "Kisara, you saw it, too, didn't you? Everyone's exhausted, and they're all overwhelmed by fear of the Gastrea. They couldn't fight like that. That's why from now on, I'll have them fear me, not the Gastrea."

Rentaro could see that Kisara's head and body were shaking. "Don't tell me, Satomi… Then that was all a performance…?"

Rentaro didn't say anything.

He could hear Kisara making a hard fist. "You'll be hated by everyone! Detested! Then who will be on *your* side, Satomi?"

"I don't need anyone. At least, not right now." This was the conclusion Rentaro had come to while looking at Midori's dead body yesterday. If he wanted to do his best to keep there from being any more victims, he would have to abandon all his feelings as a human. He would think about allowing himself the luxury of feeling emotions like everyone else after he was still breathing when this war was over.

Just then, he was hugged hard from behind in a surprise attack, and Rentaro's body stiffened.

"Idiot." There was strength in the arms that wrapped around him from behind, and body warmth found its way into Rentaro's chilled body.

"Kisara……" He felt the inside of his heart slowly become warmer.

Kisara sounded like she was sulking. "Next time, you must consult with me, your boss, before doing anything like that. You're mine, Satomi. You need my permission even to breathe, you know."

Rentaro laughed. "You're dangerous."

"Idiot."

"Sorry…"

"Idiot."

Just then, Rentaro noticed the quiet figure of a girl behind Kisara and slowly separated himself from Kisara, stiffening his expression again.

"I heard your excellent speech." Asaka Mibu, wearing light blue Japanese armor, opened her closed eyes just a little. "However, please allow me to speak frankly. You are not fit to be commander."

Kisara looked angry, but Rentaro held her back with his arm and had the girl

continue.

“If it were Master Nagamasa, he would have been able to gather the troops better and handle everything better. Simple people may not have noticed, but you cannot fool me. You are acting like a dictator.”

Rentaro looked down at Asaka coldly. “Gado is not here anymore. And I’m not Gado. His way of doing things failed. The way he was doing things was wrong. That’s why we lost two battles in the past and it’s turned into this war. Right?”

Asaka’s anger flared and she crouched down, drawing her long sword from its scabbard. “You dare insult Master Nagamasa, you peasant?!”

The next instant, it seemed like Asaka had disappeared as she left an afterimage and rushed at him a high speed. The long sword she was brandishing drew an arc and would reach Rentaro’s throat in no time. Just as it was about to get to him, a hand suddenly stretched out from the side and twisted Asaka’s arm up.

She gasped in surprise. Her body spun once and she was thrown onto the ground back first, making a depression in the ground. Her small frame convulsed sharply.

Asaka looked at the sky with her eyes still open, looking bewildered.

“Are you confused? That a simple human threw you?” The tall man in the long coat looked at her emotionlessly. “You rushed like a fireball. Are you only calm on the outside? Or did you get angry because Commander Gado was being made fun of?”

Asaka leapt back like she was being repelled and fumed with teeth bared, “Who are you?! State your name!”

“Shoma Nagisawa. Actually, I also lost my Initiator, so I was just looking for a strong Initiator. Wanna pair up with me?”

“I will not serve two masters.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not looking for a replacement for Midori, either. It’s just, rather than fighting alone, I think we could more efficiently fight Gastrea as even a temporary pair. That’s all I’m suggesting.”

“You mean…a pair to last only until the end of the Aldebaran War?”

Shoma nodded. “I mean, I’m sure you know yourself how far off the mark you are by blaming Satomi. Satomi isn’t the one who killed your Promoter. It was the Gastrea. Get rid of your grudge by fighting Aldebaran on the battlefield. Don’t be mistaken about where to point your hatred.”

Asaka was silent for a while, thinking. However, she finally got on her knees and respectfully offered her sword to Shoma with both hands. For someone militaristic like Asaka, offering her sword meant she was offering her trust and allegiance. “I give you my sword for the time being. Use it as you will, Master.” She exchanged glances with Shoma and nodded.

Asaka and Shoma seemed to have a lot in common. Neither was very approachable, and they both had reticent but sober and honest personalities. They were an impromptu pair, but they would likely work together well.

Rentaro felt emotions flare up inside him like magma. He finally had all his cards together:

The King—Rentaro Satomi and Enju Aihara.

The Queen—Kisara Tendo and Tina Sprout.

The Jack—Tamaki Katagiri and Yuzuki Katagiri.

The Ace—Shoma Nagisawa and Asaka Mibu.

And right now, Rentaro also had the strongest wild card in his hand:

The Joker—Kagetane Hiruko and Kohina Hiruko.

The plan he had from the start for a five-pair adjuvant had finally come together at the eleventh hour. It was the strongest party he could think of.

Rentaro glared at his old enemy, Aldebaran, beyond the grave marker of the collapsed Monolith.

This fight will not necessarily end in our loss.

5

Just then, Rentaro heard the sound of a large number of distant rotors in the air. Turning to spot them, he estimated that there were over twenty transport aircraft and helicopters flying in a formation toward them. When the transport craft swelled and passed over Rentaro's head, he was sure he could see the Shiba Heavy Weapons emblem printed on its side.

It looked like what he had ordered had arrived.

As Rentaro pushed his way through the stunned civil officers, a rappelling extraction rope was lowered to the ground from one of the air units, and a girl wearing a kimono with long, fluttering sleeves gave a big wave as she blew a kiss toward Rentaro. "Satomi, dear! I'm on my way! Whoa!" Miori Shiba swung dangerously midair, and just as Rentaro expected, her sleeves got tangled with the rope in the air and she lost her balance.

Rentaro didn't wait, but pushed the crowd out of the way as he rushed over, sliding to catch the falling woman.

As she hit, he felt the air being squeezed out of his lungs and almost lost consciousness as a thud vibrated all the way to his organs.

When he looked again, he was on his back and Miori was sitting on him, flushed with embarrassment.

"Owwww… It's been a while, Satomi, dear. Oof. This is kind of a kinky position."

"Hey, idiot! Don't climb down a rope ladder wearing a kimono and *geta* clogs!" Rentaro yelled.

"But I wanted to see my dear Satomi as quickly as possible!" Flirtatiously, the daughter of the weapons conglomerate CEO put her arms around Rentaro's neck and whispered in his ear. "I knew you'd save me, Satomi dearest. I think I might've sprained my ankle. I wish you'd carry me in your arms like a princess to

a nearby tent. You can take care of me however you want, *mon ami*."

Her elegant kimono was made of dyed black cloth and embroidered embellishments. Her lustrous black hair was wavy, and her beautiful white face with its shapely nose was so close to Rentaro's face his heart pounded.

"H-hey, Miori…" Rentaro said.

"Sa-to-mi, my dear… Tee-hee," she said, articulating each syllable distinctly.

Suddenly, Rentaro heard a sharp tongue click from behind him. "Too bad. It would have been nice if you'd fallen and broken your neck."

Jumping up with astonishment, he found that it was Kisara who had spoken, as he expected, and was standing in front of his chest with her arms crossed, her legs shifting with irritation. "What business do you have here? Hurry up and take care of it and leave."

"Oh my, it's been a while, Kisara. Have your breasts distended since we last met?"

"We just saw each other recently! There's no way they'd get bigger so suddenly!"

Miori took a fan out from her bosom and spread it, covering her mouth as she narrowed her eyes, laughing bewitchingly. "Unfortunately, I'm here today officially employed as a weapons advisor to dear Satomi. I don't have to listen to you."

"What?" Kisara glared at Rentaro sharply. "Hey, Satomi! What's the meaning of this?"

Rentaro felt like he'd finally gotten permission to speak as he went to stand between them. "It's true that I asked Miori to come. In order to defeat Aldebaran, we definitely need the cooperation of a weapons specialist."

In the staff tent Miori constructed was a crude desk, and the lightbulb that hung from the ceiling with a simple lampshade over it lit only the desk. But around that desk were the members of Rentaro's adjuvant, plus Miori.

Miori put her hands on the plain wood surface and looked around at everyone with an uncharacteristic scowl. "I've heard about Aldebaran from our dear

Satomi. An immortal Gastrea is no joke. You've all done your best. Let us at Shiba Heavy Weapons back you civil officers up with everything we've got."

Rentaro nodded. "Thanks. That's encouraging."

"Hey…Miori." Kisara, who had her hands crossed in front of her chest, put a hand to her chin and looked uneasily at the woman. "It's not that I have any complaints against you all, but don't we have any extra backup other than Shiba?"

Miori understood what Kisara was trying to say and nodded. "Kisara, you've been at the front lines this whole time, so you may not know much about the mood in Tokyo Area right now, but it's terrible on the home front. In the first place, in order to prevent the attack of the Zodiac Scorpion that came out during the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident, Tokyo's land, sea, and air self-defense forces were already nearly annihilated. Then, before the paint was even dry on that matter, Aldebaran came. The city's defense systems are practically worthless now.

"Even if it can miraculously defeat Aldebaran, it would take Tokyo Area years to recover to its national power to previous levels. I'm sure the Lady Seitenshi will have to deal with more national troubles than any Seitenshi we've had so far."

Gazes with deep-rooted criticism fell to the terrorist in the corner of the tent, but Kagetane just shrugged, showing no sign of remorse.

Kisara continued. "What about support from outside the country, or other areas?"

"That's difficult, too. The other countries have their own speculations, but in the end, most think of it as someone else's problem."

Miori pointed a finger at Rentaro. "I have one more piece of bad news. This is a report from Shiba Heavy Weapons' man-made satellite. It looks like the Aldebaran troops have finally started moving."

The mood inside the tent stiffened noticeably.

"When are they expected to arrive?" Rentaro asked.

“At eleven p.m.”

Rentaro hurriedly checked the time. They had a little over half a day left. Rentaro forced down the nervousness inside him and asked Miori as calmly as possible: “Well, Miori, is there a way to defeat Aldebaran?”

Everyone’s eyes seemed to cling to her as Miori suppressed a smile and hid her mouth with her fan. “Who do you think I am? Of course I came with a plan.”

Miori placed the small case at her feet on the table before opening it and pulling out a cylindrical object. The shiny black metal on its surface was probably Varanium; the red sensor inside that gave an impression of solidity, reflecting the light of the bulb above them.

When Rentaro stroked the surface, it felt cool, and when he tried holding it, it was much heavier than he expected. It was just about as thick as a tea canister, but Rentaro could hold it with one hand with no problems.

Since he had been preparing himself for what was about to come out, Rentaro was a little disappointed. And it looked like Rentaro was not the only one who felt that way.

“Oh my, is Miss Miori going to make us some tea?”

Miori did not respond to Kisara’s sarcasm, but looked at everyone with seriousness. “That is a special bomb developed by our research team. Its development code name was the ekpyrotic bomb, but everyone calls it the EP bomb because the name is too long. It can cause extreme explosive damage to a very small area, and it has twenty times the power of the five-hundred-pound bombs dropped on Aldebaran by the self-defense force, so be careful when you’re handling that.”

Rentaro almost dropped it.

Seeing that, Miori chuckled and took the can from Rentaro’s hand.

“In other words, Miori, you’re saying—”

Miori nodded. “Completely destroy Aldebaran so that not even a scrap of it is left. There is no other way for us to win.”

Rentaro stared hard at the small cylindrical bomb. It didn’t look like there was

a spare. The fate of Tokyo Area literally lay in this single small bomb.

“But Satomi, dear, at this rate, just hitting Aldebaran with this will not kill it.”

Rentaro tilted his head in question. “What do you mean?”

Miori smiled bewitchingly and continued. “Exactly what I said. At this rate, I’m still worried that there is not enough firepower. That’s why, based on the results of analysis by our research team, making this explode inside Aldebaran’s body is the only chance we have to destroy it.”

Kisara, Tina, and Shoma had looks of sudden realization on their faces, but Rentaro still didn’t understand.

“Satomi, did you know that gunpowder is more powerful when you have it explode sealed up inside a hard container than when you just let it explode as is? It’s like when you let a firecracker explode on the palm of your hand, your hand will just get burned, but if you hold it tightly in your hand, your whole hand can be blown off. The EP bomb is an amazing bomb that explodes with a high-pressure implosion reaction, but that will not completely destroy Aldebaran. That’s why we would like to have it explode with another layer of complete airtightness around it.”

After getting that explanation, Rentaro was finally also able to follow the conversation. “In other words, Miori, you’re saying we need to injure Aldebaran, toss the EP bomb in before it regenerates, wait until the wound fully heals, and then make the bomb explode?”

All of the giant Gastrea had exoskeletons that were extremely hard so that they would not be crushed under the pressure of gravity. If they injured one, threw the bomb in, and then waited for it to heal, the bomb would be taken in by the Gastrea’s body, which should completely seal it off. If they activated a timed fuse in those conditions, it was possible to create a terrifying detonation.

In other words, Miori was planning to use the Gastrea’s body as a vessel to increase the bomb’s explosive power.

Miori pointed at a slit in the middle of the tea canister–shaped bomb. Upon closer inspection, Rentaro noticed that the slit part was notched with red gradations. “If you twist the EP bomb itself to this notch, it will explode three

minutes later. It will be more sensitive at that point, so after you twist the can, make sure you do not let it undergo any strong shocks.”

Rentaro was dumbfounded at the audacity of the plan. However, it was true that it might be possible to kill Aldebaran with this. But his doubts had not all been cleared up yet. “Miori, how do you plan on getting a wind hole into Aldebaran? We don’t have a weapon left that can do that.”

The five-hundred-pound bomb dropped from the fighter aircraft could deliver a blow like a giant war hammer with the addition of gravitational acceleration, and the first blow to injure Aldebaran that Gado delivered was a satisfying one from the state-of-the-art powered-exoskeleton suit he wore. However, in order to throw the EP bomb deep into Aldebaran’s body, they would need a combination of ballistic and penetrating power greater than those. Rentaro explained without pausing that even a tank gun or bunker buster might not be strong enough.

“We do have a weapon strong enough. Just one. Something with greater ballistic and penetrating power than a tank gun. One that, if it’s not damaged, is a weapon we can trust. Our greatest and last weapon.”

“Where?” As he braced himself for the answer, he noticed that all the eyes in the tent were looking at him—or more precisely, at Rentaro’s arm and leg. Consecutive days of fighting had left the artificial skin peeling off, and he hadn’t had time to do repairs. His uniform was torn and frayed. The cloak was also a hand-me-down from Gado, so its hem was worn out, and it was tattered, but it made it look almost strangely vintage.

And, in the past, the defense ministry had asked for each individual soldier’s equipment in the New Humanity Creation Plan to have enough power to defeat a Level Four Gastrea with certainty.

Rentaro pointed at himself. “M-me?”

Miori nodded with a grin. “That’s right. Our last weapon is none other than you, my dear Satomi.”

Rentaro stared at his right arm. It was true that if they were to say who among them had attack power that could rip through Kagetane’s transcendent barrier, Imaginary Gimmick, it would no doubt be himself. However, even though

Aldebaran was not a Stage Five, it was much bigger than other Stage Fours, and if they were to rank it, it would be somewhere between a Stage Four and Stage Five. Could he really annihilate it with his own power?

Rentaro shook his head. He had to do it; there was no other way.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Miori put the palm of her hand next to his ear and patted him twice. “Okay, attention please. I want to confirm with everyone. Aldebaran is a practically immortal Gastrea, but it controls other Gastrea with its pheromones, so as long as we defeat it, we’ll win.

“In order to win this battle, we have to fulfill the following conditions: One, find Aldebaran as quickly as possible from the midst of the enemy troops. I have a plan for this. Two, cut across the enemy camp with the rest of the adjuvant protecting Satomi, bringing him to Aldebaran. And three, to have dear Satomi fight Aldebaran and injure it, twist the detonation can of the EP bomb, throw it into Aldebaran, and escape.

“If Aldebaran finds you, it’s game over. If dear Satomi is defeated, it’s game over. If the bomb Satomi throws in is not deep enough and does not completely destroy Aldebaran, it’s game over.”

“That’s tough.” Rentaro let out his frank thoughts.

“But there is no other way.”

“What are our chances of success?”

“God only knows.”

“Isn’t that hopeless?”

Miori grinned and slapped the table hard, looking around at everyone. “This plan will be called Rapier Thrust.”

Rapier Thrust. Just like the name implied, it was a plan to rush through with a sudden attack that thrust at the enemy camp like a rapier, to cut up the enemy without thinking about defense.

Miori grinned as she took a cell phone from her bosom and pushed the redial button. “There is one more lady who couldn’t come here but wanted to support

you, Satomi, so I'll introduce her now."

Catching the cell phone thrown at him, he put it to his ear. From the polite way Miori described her, Rentaro had some clue as to who the person on the other end could be.

"Satomi, it's me." He heard a dignified voice that made him straighten up unconsciously.

"I thought it'd be you, Lady Seitenshi."

"Yes, I also wanted to be there, but I want to continue the work of guiding the evacuees to the very end, so it was impossible for me to go. That's why I thought I could at least send my voice, and called."

Rentaro was startled. "You aren't in a shelter?"

"I will only go into a shelter when I have confirmed the safety of the last of Tokyo Area's citizens."

Rentaro was shocked. He could easily imagine the Seitenshi refusing the pleas of her aides and continuing to stay on the scene, and it brought to mind the troubles of her aides.

"Commander Satomi, I will not say much, but good luck. I think it is fate that you became the commander of our forces." She was exaggerating, but somehow, he did not feel like teasing her about it.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks." He hung up and threw the phone back, and Miori caught it.

Then, she looked at everyone and continued. "Now, we will abandon this place and go farther back to ready our camp. There, we will ambush Aldebaran."

Kisara interrupted hurriedly. "Farther back than this? Is there a good place to set up camp back there…?"

Rentaro and Miori looked at each other and nodded. Miori spread a map on the table and pointed to their current position, then brought her finger directly behind it.

Kisara made a startled sound.

Rentaro nodded slowly. “The location of the final battle will be the Flame of Return.”

6

“All right! All right!”

Rentaro watched from a distance as Shiba Heavy Machinery workers gave directions with hand signals that carried over the sound and shock wave of the transport aircraft propellers. The searchlight that was fastened to the bottom of the current transport vehicle was slowly lowered to the ground; apparently waiting for it to land safely, four other workers immediately bolted down the four corners to fix it to the floor. Standing next to him, Miori was watching them work with delight as she fanned herself.

A strong wind blew by, and Rentaro held down his hair to perceive the sight below him. He was on the roof of one of the seven intelligence buildings that surrounded the memorial monument, the Flame of Return, in Tokyo Area District 40. The last time he had come here, he remembered it being a scenic tourist spot, with bright sunlight filtering in through the trees even in the forest, and old ruined buildings that were nesting grounds for wild birds. Now, however, the weather was bad and there was no sight or sound of the birds. It was as if even they had abandoned Tokyo Area based on some wild instinct.

Rentaro looked up at the sky. The clouds were an ominous lead color today, too, and they flowed by quickly. The thought that they were facing a time of great social upheaval floated through his head, and Rentaro hurriedly ejected the thought from his mind.

“It looks like the work will be finished before the sun goes down. That’s good,” Miori said in a bright voice as they watched the work happening in front of them.

Rentaro watched her for a while. “Sorry, Miori.”

“Hmm?” Miori’s big eyes looked up at Rentaro.

“You’ve offered us help with so much equipment. Even though I’m sure the self-defense force has taken a bunch of stuff because it’s a state of emergency.”

“Oh my, Satomi dear, are you worried about me?”

“It’s not that I’m worried…”

Miori crossed her arms and stretched toward the sky. “Well, giving you so much equipment for free would be a big loss even for our company.”

Rentaro looked apologetically at her and scratched the back of his head. “About how much does it all cost?”

“Oh, it’s impossible for you. With your salary, you won’t be able to pay it back for the rest of your life,” said Miori, waving her hand in front of her face, putting her hand slowly on the searchlight. “But well, after this, we’re just waiting for the battery to arrive.”

“Battery? There’s no battery in that searchlight?”

“No, there is the danger of the battery corroding if it is transported by air, so it’s being brought by land right now. The self-defense force seemed to have some extra hands, so I had them do it.”

“I see…” Rentaro was uneasy for some reason, but as he quickly returned to work giving orders, his doubts disappeared before he noticed.

Rentaro gathered the remaining civil officers and explained the plan, then had them take position. Even if it was a monument remembering the result of the Second Kanto Battle, that didn’t mean that all the civil officers looked happy about it. They just had to force their way through with a brave face.

Miori passed out small radios to everyone, and there was an equipment inspection. Rentaro got an extra magazine of bullets and a supply of special large-caliber ammunition cartridges for his artificial limbs. He also grabbed a number of other things that looked to be necessities this time around.

It took until nightfall before the work to fortify the Flame of Return was completed.

Rentaro took his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the time. They had less than three hours left.

This would be the last battle, no matter what the result. That thought made his heart race whether he liked it or not. No matter how hard he tried to calm

down, the wave of nervousness did not lessen, but in fact grew stronger.

He lifted his face from his cell phone. A fire had been built in front of him, and the five pairs of people in Rentaro's adjuvant plus Miori and Sumire gathered around, surrounding it. They were able to continue within the margin of error left by the loss of Midori.

Around them stood the thick night. It was as if they were the only ones left in the world.

"We have to get into position soon, but let's defeat Aldebaran and survive to reunite. So, please get me to Aldebaran. In exchange, I will definitely be victorious."

Everyone gave a nod.

As if repeating the performance from that day before they started fighting, he raised his right arm with his XD gun high above his head. The others raised a weapon or arm as well. Kagetane and Kohina even followed, grudgingly.

But then, Rentaro noticed that there was one person who was still looking down. "What…what's the matter, Enju?"

Enju's shoulders shook in surprise for a moment, and then she shrank even farther down. She didn't speak.

Unable to comprehend her feelings, Rentaro grew nervous watching her. "Enju?"

She still didn't reply. Suddenly, Enju seemed unable to bear something any longer and turned on her heel and ran away.

For a moment, Rentaro was unsure. However, he realized that this was the sign of something unusual and pulled himself together. Rentaro shot a look at his companions and followed after Enju.

The temperature today was again unbelievably cold, and there was white in his exhaled breaths. He failed to glimpse Enju's back.

Rentaro thought frantically. From her pained expression, he thought that perhaps the cause was this place. As a teacher, Rentaro had once brought the children from the Outer Districts to the Flame of Return on a field trip. It was a

place filled with excessively happy memories. But those girls were no longer in the world. Since the girls had been killed by the angry populace, those happy memories were all flowing back to torture her with guilt.

Sumire had already given her stamp of approval, saying Enju was fine, but Rentaro had continued to consider the possibility that this would happen. What if Sumire was wrong? What if, behind Enju's smiling broadly to brighten Rentaro's day, she was bearing a whirlpool of tears and screaming at the edge of despair?

Without realizing it, Rentaro hastened his step.

Before long, he found Enju; she was about fifty meters from the fire, hugging herself and shoulders shaking, her back to Rentaro.

"Rentaro, what should I do? I don't want to fight." Her voice sounded weak, like she was at a loss. However, Rentaro had expected this, so he was able to keep from getting flustered. It was easy to tell that she had troubles jumbled up inside her just by those short sentences.

If they saved Tokyo Area, they would save a lot of innocent citizens, but those persecuting Enju and the other Cursed Children and those who murdered Enju's classmates would also benefit. A torrent of feelings wanting to carry out justice smashed into the smoldering feelings of hatred and resentment inside her, and she hardly knew what her own feelings were anymore. "I don't know anymore. I don't know, Rentaro. Why does the Stolen Generation do terrible things to us, the Cursed Children?" When she continued, she was almost screaming. "All we want is to have a place in the world!"

Rentaro closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Be careful*, he told himself. This was a situation that was no less critical than the Aldebaran War itself.

"Enju, do you hate people?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you detest the Stolen Generation?"

Enju continued to look down resolutely.

Rentaro tilted his head and looked up at the black sky for a while, then brought

his gaze back to the girl. “Enju, I believe that being a civil security officer is the one job where you can die for the sake of another person’s ‘Thank you’ or ‘You saved me.’”

Enju retorted, almost biting at him. “I heard what everyone was saying in town! I heard them saying that the civil officer system was just a good way of taking out the trash by having Gastrea and children with the virus kill each other!”

Rentaro was shocked. *Enju, you…* “Have you always thought this way? Even when you ran around to defeat Gastrea with me? Have you always felt like you were being made to take out the trash?”

Enju didn’t respond.

“Who do you want to believe?”

Enju lifted her head with a start and stared at Rentaro.

“Enju, do you want to believe me, or the people who said it’s taking out the trash?”

Enju looked like she was at a loss. Tears gathered at the edge of her eyes, and she wiped them with her sleeve. However, no matter how much she wiped, her eyes continued to overflow with tears.

“Rentaro.” That was all she said. And then, words started gushing out like a dam had burst. “Rentaro…Rentaro. Rentaro. Rentaro Rentaro Rentaro Rentaro!”

“Idiot.” He ran up to Enju, kneeled, and gave her a hug.

He could hear her shaking and sobbing on his chest, and a wet stain spread on his uniform. The poor thing’s body was chilled to the bone. “Enju, if you believe in me, you know what you should do, right? If we don’t save Tokyo Area right now, you won’t have time to draw a conclusion before it’s the end for us all. There’s no need for you to draw a conclusion right now. But in order to give you enough time to come to the conclusion that this world is really worth saving, the world must continue on.”

Enju nodded to herself in his chest, over and over. Rentaro could hear sniffles, and allowed her to cry as he rubbed her back. There were a ton of things he

wanted to do, but the time for the start of their plan was drawing nearer and nearer, minute by minute.

Finally, he sought a good time to ask her, “Do you think you can do it?”

When he did, Enju made her eyes red like a rabbit’s, sniffed, and gave a big nod.

“All right,” Rentaro said, and, putting his hand on Enju’s head, patted her and stood. “Now, shall we go back? I’m sure everyone’s worried.”

Enju rubbed her eyes and forced herself to smile, then looked up at Rentaro while forcing down a sob. “R-Rentaro, you’re so mature.”

“Huh?”

“Even though you’re only six years older than me, y-you’re so mature.”

Rentaro shook his head slowly. “It’s only because I want to be mature in front of you that I act that way. It’s not a matter of age. Do you know why I fight?”

After thinking for a while, Enju shook her head.

“The reason why I still want to live in this rotten world of ours is—It’s because you’re here, Enju.”

“Oh, they’re back!” Kisara saw Rentaro and waved at him.

Next to her, Tina couldn’t bear it any longer and ran out to him.

But she stopped short. “Wh-what is this?”

The “this” Tina pointed a finger at was a grinning Enju with her arms and legs wrapped around Rentaro’s side.

Rentaro scratched his head hard. “I don’t know. I can’t get it off.”

She was heavy and made it hard to walk to boot, so he wanted her to let go as soon as possible, but she wouldn’t listen to anything he said. When he returned to the bonfire with difficulty, Enju released him and landed with a thud, her face wreathed in smiles as she raised her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry I made you all worry. I am fine now.”

“L…looks like it,” Tamaki said, clearly confused by Enju’s sudden change in attitude.

As Rentaro watched, Enju grinned and beckoned him with a hand. In the Satomi household, this was a signal to bring your face closer because the beckoner had something to tell you. Wondering what it was, Rentaro bent his knees so his eyes were on the same level as hers.

Suddenly, something soft was pushed against his lips, and Rentaro's eyes opened wide. His vision was filled with the sight of Enju's closed eyes. Her cheeks were flushed.

Rentaro moved away from her in a hurry, and Enju opened her eyes shyly.

Rentaro exclaimed, "Hey, idiot! What are you doing, all of a sudden?! In the first place, why do you always have to suddenly—"

Enju looked triumphantly in Kisara's direction and smiled. "Rentaro and I both love each other, like I thought. Rentaro said he wanted to continue living because of me. He said breast size didn't matter!"

"Wait a minute, Satomi!" Kisara shouted. "What are you doing? You moron! Pervert!"

Enju, carried away, jeered at Kisara, who had jumped up suddenly. "Kisara's vexed!"

"I'm not vexed! Hmph!"

Hmph?

"Enju, you already have the advantage of living with him. You should be more discerning about your relationship with Big Brother!" Tina admonished.

Enju just put her hands on her hips and retorted happily, "I don't wanna be more discerning."

"Satomi, dear, let's kiss-kiss, too." Now even Miori was interfering, and the situation was getting out of control.

Asaka looked at him with contempt in her eyes. "Having relations with four women at the same time…? What a brute."

He thought that things were getting too complicated, but he also noticed that the place had grown brighter with Enju returned to her normal self. Rentaro gazed up at the night sky behind him. *With this, all of our preparations are*

ready, Aldebaran.

All that was left was to wait for the searchlight batteries to arrive…

7

The vehicle shook as it popped up stones, and the objects in the luggage compartment covered with a waterproof sheet sounded like they were lolling about.

“Damn it, why do we have to do something like this?”

Staring at his partner cursing in the passenger seat with his legs stretched out in front of him, Daigo Jogasaki gripped the steering wheel hard.

“Well? Daigo, why do we hafta do something like this? Huh?”

Daigo thought his partner was pretty drunk. He’d been grumbling about the same thing over and over like this for a while now. Well, it was understandable. Daigo responded: “I don’t want to do it, either. I mean, transporting batteries is…”

“Not that! What I’m trying to say is, why are we heading toward the civil officer troop that Rentaro Satomi of all people is leading?”

Rentaro Satomi—when Daigo heard that name, his heart could not remain calm, either.

“We’re elites! Respect us! Damn it!” Daigo’s partner, Tatsumi Ashina, held a cup of *shochu* in his hand as he yelled and kicked the dashboard with his feet. The latch broke and maps slid out of the opening and fell to their feet.

“Damn it,” he swore again, moping. He ground his teeth in regret, and started to sob. The self-defense force camouflage uniform he wasn’t used to wearing did not suit him at all.

Again, Daigo could not help but look back at his own decline. Just as Tatsumi had said, they had been elites. He had been incredulous when they received the invitation from the talented Takuto Yasuwaki, who was a year his senior at the National Defense Academy and had graduated at the top of his class. He and

Tatsumi had talked it over for a whole day, a serious conversation about what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. And in the end, it had been a great decision to follow him.

Somehow, Yasuwaki was selected at a young age to become the commander of the Seitenshi's personal guard, and thanks to his influence, Daigo and Tatsumi had been able to work at the palace as his subordinates. The guys at the Seitenshi's palace were all terrible cowards who were easy to domineer over. Their duties were easy and their pay was good.

When they had free time, they would change into plainclothes and go to the Outer Districts where they would shoot at Cursed Children. In order to keep them from running away, they restrained them with many layers of strong wire and then took turns picking them off from afar. It was really fun to shoot at a living doll that could scream, and it wasn't like the girls paid taxes or were in the family registers; the men almost felt proud—like they were playing a role in beautifying the area.

When he went shooting with Yasuwaki, the man had often talked about his dreams. The Seitenshi still did not have a successor, and her advisors had often told her that she should get married. Yasuwaki wanted to become the idealistic princesses' knight in shining armor, receive a post in the national government, and pull the strings of Tokyo Area from behind the scenes.

Yasuwaki had said, "Of course, I'll also bring you guys with me."

Daigo had believed in him. He had believed in his own shining future and had not suspected anything. However, a trap had opened its jaws in an unexpected place.

The Seitenshi Sniper Incident—apparently that was what the public called it. The skinny civil officer with the black uniform whom the Seitenshi had hired independently had changed everything.

Daigo's hands gripped the steering wheel, creaking in anger. "I wonder what Commander Yasuwaki is doing right now…"

Tatsumi was brooding next to him, but even though he was drunk, his ears were sharp enough to catch Daigo's words. "Don't call that idiot *Commander*! Rumor has it that he's in some mental hospital right now. He must've been real

scared of that kid—I heard his hair turned all white."

"Get out of my sight, and never come near Tina again. If you refuse, I will shoot you to death here and now for refusing to obey orders from a superior officer."

Just remembering that voice sent chills down his spine. Of course, Yasuwaki's subordinates, Daigo and Tatsumi, were with him at the site of his downfall, but they were so overawed that they couldn't move a muscle.

It wasn't that Daigo didn't sympathize with Yasuwaki, but because of what Yasuwaki had dragged them into, Daigo and Tatsumi also had to take some of the blame for the incident. The careers that they had built up turned into nothing, and they were made to join the boring transport squad. They would probably be doing this job for the rest of their lives. Forever, in this job with no opportunity for advancement. But right now, it seemed like it would be faster to be killed by Aldebaran.

"Stop."

Daigo hit the brake reflexively and pitched forward. "Wh-what's the matter?"

Tatsumi ignored Daigo's question and got out of the car. They had reached the bank of a small lake. Thinking something was suspicious, Daigo followed him and went around to the back of the transport vehicle. There, Tatsumi opened the door to the back without permission and took out a battery that filled his arms.

"Hey, what are you doing—" said Daigo.

"*This* is what I'm doing—!" So saying, Tatsumi threw the battery into the lake. It rolled down the slope slowly before it finally dropped under the water with a loud plop.

Daigo almost screamed as he grabbed Tatsumi's shoulder. "What are you doing, you idiot?! We'll be severely reprimanded if anyone finds out."

Tatsumi's bleary eyes reflected an intellectual light that did not seem dead drunk. "No one will find out, Daigo. Think about it carefully."

"What?"

Tatsumi dug in his pocket and pulled out two plane tickets. "These are for the

last flight to Osaka Area. They rose up to a ridiculous price, so I had to use your money, too, and now we're penniless, but with this, we can survive. Where there's life, there's hope. Either way, this is the end for Tokyo Area."

Ignoring orders and deserting. It was true that they would be severely punished if they were caught—but of course, that was only if Tokyo Area continued to exist.

Tatsumi's hands grabbed Daigo's shoulders tightly. His eyes shone, and his mouth was twisted into an evil smile. "Not only have we used up all our money, but we're also clearly criminals. Now that we've done all this, it's terribly unfortunate, but *we'll just have to have Tokyo Area fall, or we'll be in trouble*. Right?"

We'll just have to have Tokyo Area fall, or we'll be in trouble… That was true. But even so, it pricked the small conscience that Daigo had left. Was there really a need to do all this? It was one thing to have nothing to do with the civil officer troop as they fought the Gastrea, but to purposefully do something that would be advantageous to the Gastrea…

Just then, he noticed that Tatsumi's two jet-black eyes were peering at him, and he got chills up his spine. "Don't tell me you're gonna let me do all this and then pretend that you're a good boy by yourself when it's over," Tatsumi said.

"O-of course not. That's not funny. It's not enough to kill Rentaro Satomi normally," said Daigo.

"Then, you know what you have to do, right? Those guys destroyed us. Now, it's their turn to atone for their sins."

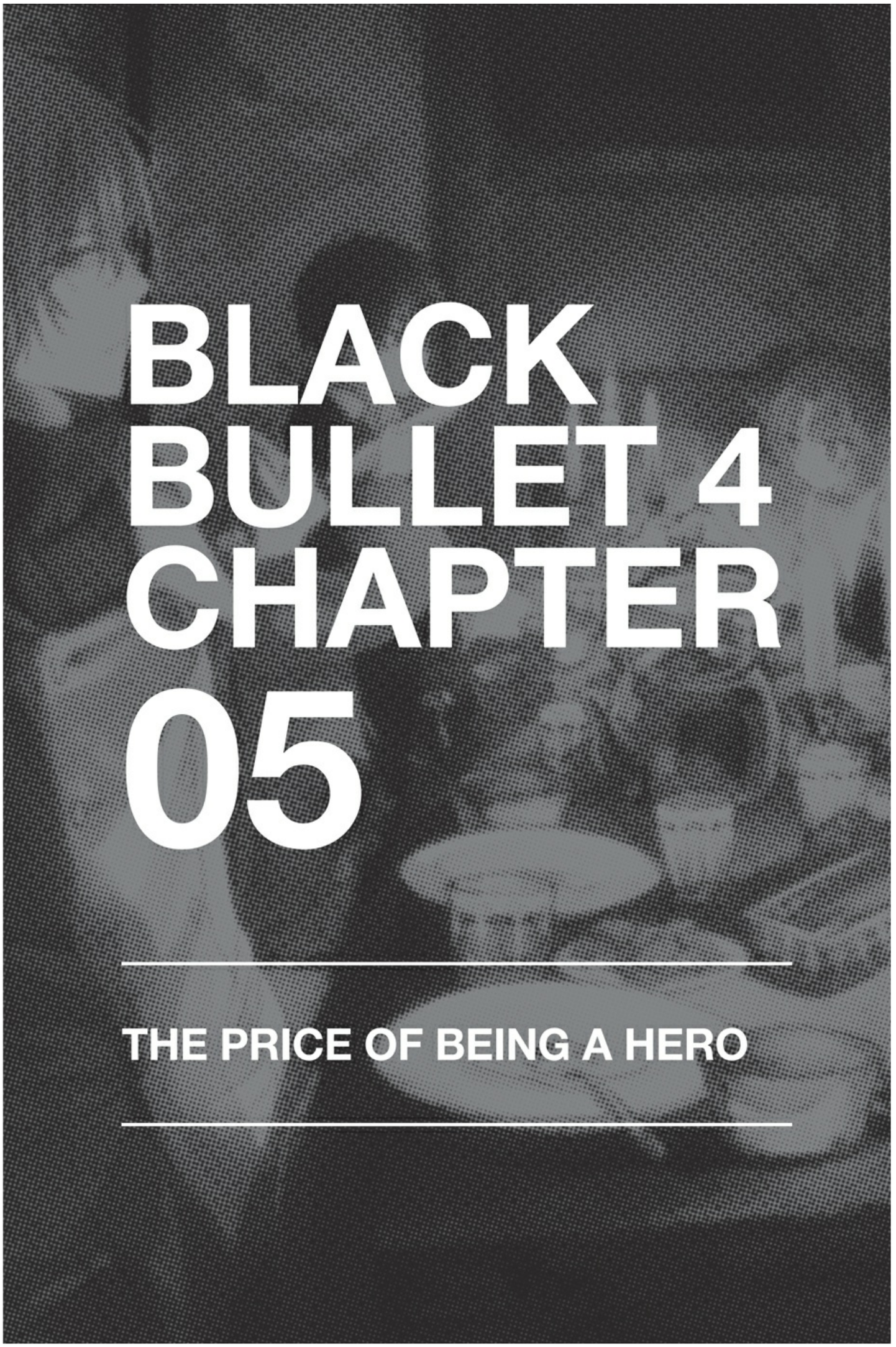
Daigo could not refuse.

After that, they threw all the batteries into the lake, and Tatsumi upturned a can of gasoline that he "accidentally brought" and emptied it of its contents. When he threw in a lighter, tongues of flame reached out from the lake.

Tatsumi started to dance with the flames and shout with joy. "Whoooooo! Take that! Now it's over for them!"

Watching his partner laughing maniacally out of the corner of his eye, Daigo wiped the sweat that had beaded on the palm of his hand on his pants. It was as

if Tatsumi had been possessed by Commander Yasuwaki, but Daigo desperately forced himself to avoid speaking the thought aloud.



BLACK BULLET 4

CHAPTER 05

THE PRICE OF BEING A HERO

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1

Rentaro vented his frustration by kicking an eighteen-liter drum barrel. The cylinder clunked and blew away, falling from the top of the building, getting swept sideways by the wind and disappearing from his sight. He rubbed his head vigorously and banged a fist over and over on the wall of the pump house. “Why?! Why aren’t the batteries here yet?!”

“Rentaro,” Enju said with an uneasy voice.

Rentaro put both hands on the wall and tried to calm his ragged breath. Eddies of wind gusted around the building like a flute shrilling in his ears and violently fluttered their clothes.

Rentaro checked the time and ground his teeth in despair. It was 10:50 p.m. There were only ten minutes left before Aldebaran was predicted to arrive.

Wandering to the edge of the building’s roof, he gazed out into the distant darkness. Because there was no electricity in the Outer Districts, there were no streetlamps. The thick cloud of ash from the Monolith’s collapse that covered the sky blocked the moon, so they could not count on light from that, either.

Because his eyes were used to the darkness, it wasn’t like he couldn’t even see an inch in front of him, but it was not incorrect to say that he could see pretty much nothing. The only people who could move freely in this darkness were those few Initiators who had night vision, like Tina.

And he could hear from the darkness the countless feet crushing bedrock as the voices of the Gastrea surged forward. Even though he couldn’t see them,

they were there.

His nails dug into his fist. According to his and Miori's plan, they would use the searchlights set on the roofs of the seven buildings surrounding the Flame of Return to quickly find Aldebaran's location and then attack all at once. However, given the current situation, the searchlights were obviously useless. In which case, their plan would fall apart at its first step, with them unable to determine Aldebaran's position.

The civil officer troops were already in position, hiding within the bottom floor of the building. It was too late to order a retreat. It made Rentaro regret not replenishing their supply of flares.

Should they charge in desperately like this and try to lessen the enemy numbers even a little bit? But it was a fight they had no chance of winning. Once it became a Pandemic inside Tokyo Area, they would not be able to remove the lesion.

Rentaro closed his eyes tightly. Even if he knew that they would definitely lose, he still had to carry out his duty as the leader of the civil officer troops.

There was no other way.

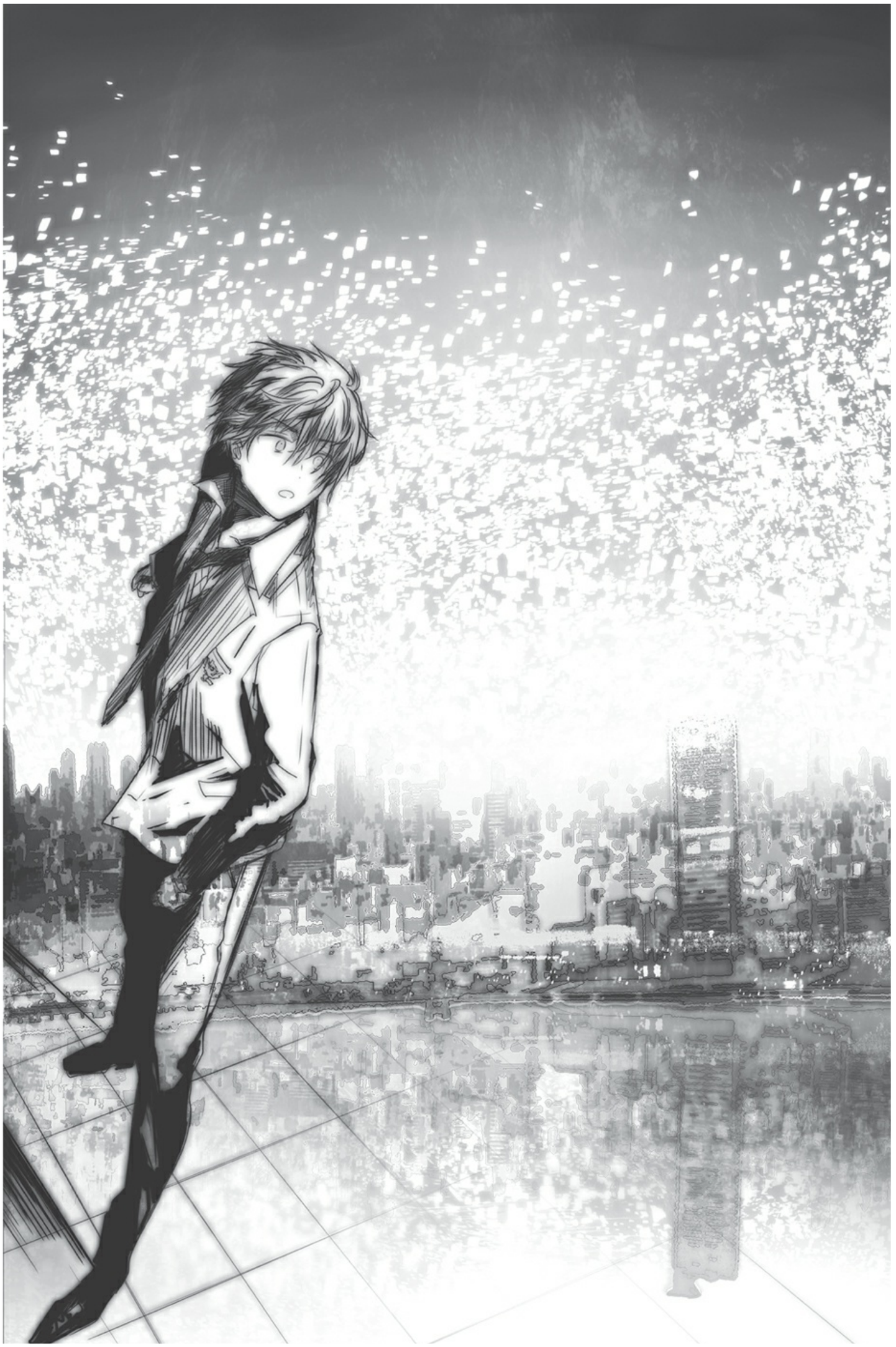
Rentaro took the radio in his hand and took a deep breath. "All troops, char—"

Just then, Enju pulled his sleeve. "Rentaro, look at that."

"What now, at a time like this?" Rentaro asked rhetorically, irritated, but Enju couldn't answer him. She just pointed dumbfounded at a single spot in the sky.

Suddenly, Rentaro felt a soft, unusual light behind him, so he turned around to follow Enju's gaze. His eyes, which had gotten used to the darkness, were suddenly hit with a scalding beam of light. Rentaro shielded them with his hands and squinted.

He was astounded. The sky over all of Tokyo Area was filled with a dazzling light. He soon realized that the source of the light was a large number of soccer ball–size hot-air balloons. At the bottom of the ball-shaped balloons was oiled paper soaked in fuel and burning brightly, the hot air making the balloons rise gently as they floated left and right.



What was amazing was their number. The thousands upon thousands of balloons that filled the sky danced in the air like down feathers as they bumped into each other on their ascent. As they did so, even more were added to their number, and the light grew two or three times brighter.

Rentaro's heart was stolen by the otherworldly light, and his mouth gaped open. "It's the Genan Festival. It was today, huh…?"

Involuntarily, he recalled the conversation he once had with his students.

"The balloons are supposed to be filled with thanks to the people who died fighting in the Gastrea War, and the festival started after the Second Kanto Battle."

"Mr. Rentaro… Are we going to die? Will we be able to live…to see the next Genan Festival…?"

But the Genan Festival that took place every year was supposed to be a modest affair that was held near the Flame of Return monument. There had never been such a large-scale festival held in the past ten years. And for it to become this bright, there had to have been an enormous number of people and balloons… Who in the world did something this big?

Just then, Rentaro's cell phone vibrated.

"Satomi, it's me."

Rentaro gave a start and readjusted his hold on his phone. "Lady Seitenshi…I see, it was you…!"

The Seitenshi seemed to straighten herself on the other end of the phone as she said, "Satomi, each and every one of those balloons carries the hopes, prayers, and will to survive of the citizens of Tokyo Area. Can you see them? If you win this battle, the Gastrea will fall. If you lose, *we* will fall. I entrust Tokyo Area's future to you. Now go, with the courage to continue fighting no matter what."

Rentaro closed his eyes and then opened them slowly. "Don't worry, Lady Seitenshi. I will definitely win." Hanging up, Rentaro took Enju's hand quietly, and they watched the world of light together from the best seats in the house.

The warm light made the balloons translucent, like paper lanterns, and the mass of orange nestled close and touched, sometimes crashing together as the enormous number of them slowly floated up.

Rentaro felt a hard squeeze through their connected hands. Looking next to him, he saw the tears readily flowing down Enju's face as she looked up at the sky.

"Enju, it's true that people from the Stolen Generation killed your classmates. But it was also somehow the Stolen Generation that created this light. People probably have two faces—light and darkness. This is the face of light. If even you can see the prayers and hope in each and every one of those balloons, then—let's fight."

Enju quickly wiped her tears with her sleeve and regarded him solemnly. She gave a firm nod. "Of course! We have to save everyone."

He felt like his and Enju's feelings were one. It was an indescribable sensation of unity.

It was strange. It wasn't as if the situation had suddenly turned in their favor. In fact, they were overwhelmingly and hopelessly at a disadvantage. Even so, what was this feeling that was filling his heart? Why was he so at peace right now?

The stiff nervousness dissipated, and he felt renewed. Until just now, he had been worried about whether or not they could win, but now that feeling was gone.

No, he was now certain they *could* win. There was no way they would lose.

Rentaro turned back with a determined look.

And then, he froze in surprise.

He could see. He could see perfectly. The countless lights that lit up all of Tokyo Area drove away the night sky in place of the searchlights, showing the troops of darkness as clear as day. He spotted Aldebaran easily. In the middle of the enemy toward the back—*Hallelujah.*

Enju stepped forward firmly, and her usually black eyes burned red.

Rentaro reached his right arm straight out and started his artificial limbs. Geometric patterns emerged on the inside of his eye as the graphene transistor nano-core processor activated. He felt a shock of electricity spread through his mouth as the iris of his artificial eye spun. He had only been able to see out of one eye, but now he could see out of both, and his field of vision expanded. He was able to see in 3-D.

Rentaro put the radio to his mouth and took a deep breath. “We will now begin Operation Rapier Thrust. I repeat, we will now begin Operation Rapier Thrust. Tina, do it now.”

As he spoke, there was the sound of an explosion that made him duck involuntarily. Of the seven buildings that surrounded the monument, the six buildings other than the one Rentaro and Enju were standing on exploded at the same time—or so it seemed.

The 20-mm Vulcan gun, 30-mm chain gun, 127-mm cannon, 155-mm howitzer, and other antiair guns fired at once from the roofs of those buildings. To Rentaro, the detonation and vibration seemed like a volcanic eruption, and it left his ears ringing.

There was no sign of the shooter. They were all unmanned, controlled instead by Tina’s remote control modules and, thereby, the neurochip in her brain. Rentaro knew firsthand just how scary their precision was, after being fired on by six antitank rifles from different places at the same time.

The line of fire rushed into the Gastrea’s flying troops, and the next instant, they exploded. Pushed back by the superheated shock waves, Rentaro couldn’t even open his eyes.

In the blink of an eye, hellfire materialized in the air and filled the sky. Flying Gastrea had their wings torn off, were burned up, and had their brains blown apart as they fell from the sky, one after another. It was an attack as precise as if they were all individually manned fort cannons. With a line of fire of certain destruction more accurate than that of an advanced computer, Tina exploded timed fuses in enemy vital spots to give the most efficient blows to the swarm.

Rentaro gulped. This was the real strength of the former Rank 98, Tina Sprout. As long as she could hack the suitable weapons with her neurochip to integrate

and control them, it was possible that she could even by herself create as much firepower as an aircraft carrier.

Tina might even be able to defeat all the flying Gastrea by herself.

Rentaro took another deep breath. “All troops, charge!”

He heard war cries from downstairs. The civil officers burst forth in a desperate attack with their adjuvants.

“All right, Enju. We should go, too.”

He and Enju nodded at each other and ran down the stairs.

Just then, he heard a scream from the radio. “There’s a giant Gastrea rushing straight toward us!”

Stopping his feet running down the stairs, he ran through the floor and rushed up against the window glass. “What is that…?!”

A giant Gastrea was wriggling on the ground. It was long and thin, and bigger than any snake or worm could ever be. The diameter of its torso was about as big as a subway tunnel, and it was about as long as a small building.

Jormungand—The name of the giant snake from Norse mythology, created by the wicked god Loki, ran through Rentaro’s head.

It was probably a Stage Three. The enemy still had that ace up its sleeve? The giant snake writhed on the ground, cutting away large swaths of trees and upturning scrap cars as it rushed straight at the building where they were positioned.

By the time they realized the giant snake was after them, it was too late. It stretched up and twined around the building and, shockingly, it started to constrict the building from its base. The metal frame twisted, and the glass windows passed their critical temperature to shatter with a crack.

Hey, this isn’t funny…! Gulping involuntarily, Rentaro’s vision tilted, and he stumbled. It was already too late by the time he realized that the floor had become slanted. With an unpleasant and nauseating sound of collapse, the top part of the building bent over, and the floor became so slanted that Rentaro couldn’t remain standing. Falling and rolling on the floor along with rusted steel

desks and chairs, Rentaro landed back first on the floor—which had been a wall just a moment ago. The air was squeezed from his lungs with a sharp pain, like a hole had opened up in his back.

Suddenly, his hips floated up with a different kind of vibration. Opening one eye, he found the building bowing, as if it were leaning against another building rather than fully crashing to the ground.

In the bizarre world where vertical had become horizontal, he had no time to catch his breath. Enju tumbled toward him with pieces of glass; he froze when he spotted where she was going to fall.

At that rate, she would go through the windows and smash into the ground.

“Ennnnjuuuuuuuuu!” He stretched out his arm immediately. The girl stretched out her hand back.

With a screech, Enju’s body went through the glass window.

“Gah!” A heavy impact ripped through Rentaro, nearly dislocating his right shoulder. Opening his eyes as much as he could, he saw that Enju had just barely managed to grab his arm in time and was hanging in midair.

“Rentaro!” Enju called out in a pained voice.

He felt throbbing pain along his spine. He didn’t have time to pull out a mirror and check, but he knew he had been stabbed by the countless shards of glass that had tumbled down with the girl.

Enju’s wondrous jumping ability could manifest itself only with a hard floor to jump off of, so she couldn’t step on air to jump. He had to make sure she didn’t fall from this height. “Hang on, Enju. I’ll pull you up.” Holding the excruciating pain at bay, he gritted his teeth and put all of his strength into his arm.

Just then, he felt overwhelming pressure and heat on his back. Turning his head, he found the giant snake Gastrea had stuck its head into the building and was flicking its red tongue in and out of its mouth.

The hot air it breathed out smelled like rotten eggs. With just the long and narrow snout and pair of horns visible, it looked just like a dragon.

If Rentaro didn’t release Enju’s hand, he wouldn’t be able to evade the giant

snake's attack. He paled with despair.

Suddenly, the giant snake opened its mouth wide.

"Satomi, I'm coming." Unexpectedly, a graceful voice echoed from his radio.

Kisara, where are you coming from? Turning his head, Rentaro yelped. "Ahh!"

Kisara was accessing their building from the roof of the one it was leaning on. She rushed down a steep slope with an angle of elevation no less than forty-five degrees, and at a speed close to falling.

She was being reckless. She didn't even bring an Initiator with her.

The giant snake noticed something out of order and raised its head to meet Kisara directly.

Without warning, there was a sharp exhale. "Tendo Sword Drawing, First Style, Number 6—" With a clear tone that froze the air, Kisara drew the sword at her hip from its sheath as fast as a lightning strike. "—*Midaei Suiken*."

Countless giant cutlines scattered into the air, and Kisara and the Gastrea crossed paths. They were so fast that Rentaro couldn't tell what was going on. Kisara braked suddenly with the heel of her shoe and exhaled deeply as she slowly resheathed her sword. When the naked blade was sheathed all the way to its base, the head of the giant snake that was already stiffening with rigor mortis spurted blood, and pieces of flesh that had been cut off like dots of a die splattered down in chunks.

The body that had lost its head wriggled like a loose string, and then fell from the building. It fell with a creak of the ground and a thunderous roar, raising a thick cloud of dust.

The civil officers below them cheered as they saw the defeat of the enemy's general-class Gastrea.

Rentaro watched the scene with his mouth slightly open. Someone who wasn't an Initiator or a mechanized soldier—a regular human—had defeated a Stage Three Gastrea with a single attack. A Stage Three. With one attack.

Kisara jumped down to where Rentaro was and flipped her hair. "Satomi, we're going to pull Enju up."

“R-right,” said Rentaro.

With Kisara’s help, they were finally able to pull Enju up. However, there was no time to pull out the pieces of glass stuck in his back before the world shook and he fell to his knees. Opening his eyes a little, he saw that the floor was getting even closer to horizontal. Cement dust fell and was blown away, and the entire building cracked.

Rentaro broke into a cold sweat. The edifice was leaning over even more. At this rate, it wouldn’t last more than a few minutes. If they stopped here, they would end up committing suicide with the building.

“Enju!”

She nodded once and put her right hand around Rentaro’s hips, and the other arm around Kisara’s waist.

“Let’s go.”

Enju bent her legs deeply and jumped. The next instant, Rentaro couldn’t even open his eyes under the pressure; it felt like a giant was pushing its palm against him. Next to him, even Kisara screamed a little.

Hearing the sound of clothes flapping, Rentaro forced his eyes open a little. The sky was crimson, lit up by the otherworldly glow of the hot air balloons within it, while the forest below held Gastrea in a dense formation. Civil officers, the size of grains of rice, attacked like the thrust of a rapier.

Rentaro tapped Enju’s shoulder twice and pointed at the middle of the vicious battle below them. His signal meant to land there.

Enju gave a nod, and, doing a triangle jump off the building, she kicked twice. He felt G’s hit his side so hard that it almost made him groan.

Cutting through the wind, they went up over a hundred meters before inertia and gravity canceled each other out. They fell into free fall the next instant, and the brown dirt of the ground grew bigger as he watched.

Just before they ran into the ground, Rentaro and Kisara curled up their bodies and rolled as they landed.

Even though his vision spun, Rentaro stood up quickly. The ground was muddy

with rain, so Rentaro's uniform was instantly covered in it. But he didn't worry about the details as he checked his surroundings.

They were in the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by the sound of fighting, the rumble of the earth, and splashes of mud as ground was trampled.

"Run, Satomi!" Even Kisara shouting with all her might was hard to hear in the midst of the shouts and war cries around them.

Rentaro and Enju nodded at each other, and they ran through the battlefield, kicking up mud.

Noticing that Rentaro had arrived, the civil officers around them exploded in war cries that made the air vibrate. Morale rose immediately, and their attack intensified. They surrounded the running Rentaro and Enju in a defensive circle, and the civil officers who had been aiming for the outriders boldly charged at Gastrea of all shapes and colors.

He saw Kohina jumping from tree to tree like a giant flying squirrel as she precisely severed the heads of the Gastrea around her. Smaller Gastrea were caught up in Yuzuki's invisible threads, and Tamaki made them explode with his Varanium chain saw punches and roundhouse kicks. Blood splashed into the air.

All of a sudden, there was a scream from behind him, and even as he ran at full speed, he turned around to see a giant rhino with horns all over its face scattering the civil officers around it as it charged toward him.

"Go on ahead!" Kisara used her legs to brake suddenly and turned, lining up next to Asaka. The two swordswomen nodded at each other and readied their swords.

Rentaro wanted to see the outcome of the fight, but he forced himself to face front again and ran on. Soon, he heard the high-pitched scream of a monster dying in agony.

There was one here, too. Another Gastrea of the same shape was approaching. They had been planning on catching him in a pincer attack.

"Let's go, Satomi." He suddenly heard the reliable voice of his senior disciple next to his ear, and he was filled with strength.

Rentaro trampled the mud with the bottoms of his shoes as he stopped, inhaled, and focused his energy. He aimed his right fist at the Gastrea rushing at them and exploded a cartridge. The smell of gunpowder smoke burned his nostrils. Next to him, Shoma was using a similar technique.

The rhino made the ground rumble as it approached. With its weight, its attack would be like that of a bulldozer.

Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 3—

"*—Homura Kasen*!!!"

The rhino was hit straight on by two fists rushing at it, and its horns exploded. Rentaro and Shoma were likewise pushed back by the enemy rushing at them.

The Gastrea with the attack power of a heavy tank had its horns broken as fists exploded onto the bridge of its nose, and its face was blasted into tiny pieces. The rhino's body, which had veered off in a different direction, did not seem to realize at first that its head had been pulverized. Suddenly, it lost its balance, fell with a crash, and slid on the mud for more than ten meters before it finally stopped moving.

"Go, Satomi!" Before Shoma could finish talking, Rentaro had already started running. However, by the time he ran past a giant tree and noticed the Gastrea waiting next to it, it was already too late. The hard-shelled Gastrea with large pincers lowered its arms like a strangely swollen hammer. A giant shadow covered Rentaro.

Just as he was about to be crushed, there was a thunderous sound, and the pincers stopped.

"Kagetane!" Rentaro yelled.

The man had sprung out in front of Rentaro and protected him with his repulsion field. It creaked with the enormous force of the attack, and the ground sank beneath them as bedrock was lifted up. The field couldn't absorb all of the attack, and the capillaries in Kagetane's body burst, showering Rentaro's face with blood.

However, in his brush with death, Kagetane just threw back his body and laughed loudly. "That's right! Fighting to live! How exciting! This is death! This is

war! How wonderful!”

Enju dove under the crab Gastrea’s body and kicked the six legs holding it up, destroying them one by one. As the body shook and fell, she brought her foot up and kicked straight above her. The shell armor was smashed to pieces, and the giant Gastrea flew up into the air. It crashed into the ground a moment later, bubbles frothing from its mouth as it died.

Kagetane had released his repulsion field and fallen to one knee. As Rentaro was about to run to him, Kagetane turned his head toward Rentaro and stretched out a hand. From the depths of his mask came a dark, hoarse voice. “Nameless Reaper.”

Rentaro didn’t even have time to be surprised at the unexpected move as a sickle-shape came toward him, leaving an afterimage. There was a slashing sound, and Rentaro’s shoulders shook. Not knowing what was going on, his eyes opened wide, and there was a thud behind him as something fell.

When he looked, he saw that the sickle that had grazed his cheek had taken off the head of a Stage One that had come at him from behind. The next instant, blood spurted up like a geyser from its neck. Blood splashed all over Kagetane’s white mask.

It took Rentaro a while before he realized that Kagetane had saved his life.

Kagetane stood up and waved his hands. “Go! You don’t have time to worry about me!”

Rentaro nodded a quick thanks and took off again. They had already suffered a lot of damage. The civil officers had already lost many—a chip was starting to form in the blade of the rapier that was supposed to cut through the enemy forces.

Even amid all that, the strength of Rentaro’s adjuvant was a cut above the rest. Kohina was pushed back by an enemy attack and thrown into the air, but waiting there was Yuzuki, ready with her threads strung like tightropes. She inverted heaven and earth with a thread wrapped around her foot and caught Kohina midair like a circus trapeze artist. Then, using the rope bridge as a fulcrum, she spun her body and accelerated, and then threw Kohina straight down. Kohina’s surprise attack from above pierced through the head of the

Gastrea sneaking up behind Tamaki, killing it.

Rentaro felt his chest grow warm from the inside. His adjuvant of ten was switching pairs between them as they unleashed a surge of chain attacks to cover each other's blind spots.

Finally, the Gastrea started to falter at the adjuvant's ferocity. The enemy was starting to fall apart.

With a finger, Rentaro signaled Enju, running next to him. She nodded.

The cartridges in Rentaro's leg exploded, and the empty shells it spit out flowed out behind him. "Ahhhhhhhh!" He kicked off the ground. Enju and Rentaro, who were superaccelerated, came together to form a single bullet that passed through the spaces between their enemies' legs, getting them through the dense enemy formation. Then, breaking out of the forest, the world opened up.

However, their unnatural stance was their ruin, and they messed up their landing to bounce over and over the muddy ground. When they finally stopped, Rentaro pushed himself up with both hands and spat gritty mud from his mouth. It looked like they had been blown all the way to the plain where the tents had been set up.

When he looked at Enju next to him, he saw that she was looking up with her head tilted, dazed.

As he stood, he followed her gaze, and then his body froze.

"This is…" Rentaro's neck bent forty-five degrees, locked in position as he looked at the monster standing still in the darkness. "This is Aldebaran…"

There it was: a large body that could be mistaken for a small mountain. It had a long tail, and eight short, thick legs that looked like stone pillars holding up its gigantic body. It stood on all eight, and on its back was a hard shell that looked like that of an armadillo. From cracks in the shell stretched countless tentacles. Each tentacle seemed to move independently, like the mythological, gigantic, eight-forked serpent.

There were countless holes in the sides of its shell, as well; they were probably where it released the pheromones that it quickly spread via the wings tucked

behind its shell. On its face, there were no eyes or nose. There was a giant hole that seemed to be its mouth, and from the depths of that eternal darkness, its breath whistled as it dripped green mucus. It looked, vaguely, like a turtle or armadillo monster.

Now that he thought about it, he had only seen its silhouette from afar, or heard stories from people who had fought against it, so this was his first time seeing it with his own eyes.

Its breath was hot. Just its existence gave off a huge pressure, and when it walked, the earth shook.

Rentaro's stomach shriveled in fear, and he felt like he was going to vomit.

But as long as we defeat this…

Aldebaran had finally noticed them, and it pointed the tips of all its tentacles at them, not paying any attention to the battle in the forest. It was possible that Aldebaran had realized that Rentaro and Enju were the generals.

It was a chance match between commanders. The other squad members were doing well, but they would not last long. If he did not finish things here, everything they had done up until now would go to waste.

Enju stayed on guard as she edged closer to him. "We don't have much time, Rentaro."

"I know. We'll be at a disadvantage if this drags out for too long. We'll go at full power from the start." Rentaro exhaled and relaxed his whole body, then tensed all four limbs and dropped his center of gravity, taking the Tendo Martial Arts Water and Sky Stance.

"Commence battle. We will now eliminate the enemy."

"Hyuuuurrrrooooooooooooooooo!!!"

Aldebaran made the first move. Like a bull mad with anger, it gave a war cry and then twisted its body—its tail came at them along the ground, moving as fast as a whip.

Enju's arms wrapped around Rentaro's waist, and the next instant, Rentaro and Enju were in the air. However, the enemy had taken into consideration the

possibility that Rentaro and Enju would evade its first attack: While they were midflight and unable to change direction, it brought down a tentacle in a vertical slash, along with a gust of wind. Rentaro and Enju put the soles of their shoes together and kicked off against each other, separating in midair. With a frightening rush of wind, a giant tentacle scraped the spot where Rentaro and Enju had been the moment before.

Rentaro activated his artificial eye, and the iris spun quickly, calculating the estimated location of the tentacle's next attack. Rentaro pointed his leg thrusters in Aldebaran's direction and exploded one of the cartridges to change direction. His vision contracted and he felt like his body was going to be torn apart by the acceleration. Barely avoiding the undulating tentacles as they attacked one after another, Rentaro rained down on the center of Aldebaran's shell from above.

"Haaaaaaaaa!" He released a dropkick with his artificial right leg.

Super-Varanium and hard skin. Two extremely hard objects hit each other, and a crack formed in the shell as Rentaro felt his foot sink a little into flesh.

However, it was far from a fatal wound. Aldebaran screamed in pain and shook its body hastily. The vast shell shook like an earthquake, and pathetically, Rentaro had to use all that he had just to hold on. If he got thrown off, those thick legs would definitely trample him.

"Enju! Aim for its head!"

Enju had been continuing the air fight, jumping from tentacle to tentacle as they moved in all directions. At Rentaro's shout, she jumped on a tentacle and ran down the road of flesh with her pigtails streaming out behind her until she drew near Aldebaran's body.

Enju kicked a tentacle and dropped a second kick on its shell from the air. The attack exploded onto Aldebaran's head at the speed of a falling meteor, but it hit the surface of Aldebaran's face and then, Rentaro was free from the vibrations for an instant.

"Rentaro!"

He was rescued by Enju jumping over to him, and together, they crawled under

Aldebaran's torso. The pulsating shell formed a ceiling about two meters overhead and gave off hot body heat, and its eight legs carried out their job of supporting the ceiling.

First, they had to stop Aldebaran's movements.

"Let's overturn this monster turtle."

Enju's eyes opened wide. However, she soon gave a big nod. "All right."

"Okay."

They glared resolutely at the hard, pulsating stomach that formed the ceiling above them. Rentaro jumped high with Enju and whacked the striker at the bottom of his leg cartridge. His leg leapt up with violent speed. His eyes met Enju's.

"*Inzen Kokutei*, Unlimited Burst!!!"

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

The two overhead kicks, unleashed with all of their desperate strength, slammed into Aldebaran's abdomen. The shock wave made a crack in the ground and blew back the air around them.

Rentaro gritted his teeth as cold sweat poured from him. The skin was hard. If their kicks weren't strong enough and they were blown away, they could easily be thrown to the ground to break their necks. Impatiently, he forced strength from his whole body into his fingertips.

Kicks beyond human understanding and the mass of a high-level Gastrea: Only then did the balance between the two pushing against each other fall apart. A huge depression appeared in Aldebaran's abdomen, and then its enormous frame gently floated into the air.

Rentaro couldn't even imagine how many tons it was, but all two meters of the monster danced in the air, almost like a joke. Aldebaran struggled like it couldn't tell what was going on.

And then, it crashed, back first, onto a dilapidated building, making the building collapse. The edifice crumbled toward the monster, raising clouds of dirty smoke.

Aldebaran, thrown into a building with its stomach showing, looked exactly like a turtle flipped onto its shell.

However, the monstrous Gastrea started struggling again, wriggling its legs. Its abdomen started to regenerate. That much damage would have killed a normal Gastrea immediately, but it wasn't going to go down that easy.

Rentaro put his hand on the EP bomb that hung from his belt on a carabiner, gripping it in his hand as he asked the cold Varanium to save them. "Enju, let's finish this."

There was no need to explain the whole plan. Enju put her arms around Rentaro's waist and jumped. As Rentaro's vision contracted from the g-forces pushing down on his head, they jumped to an altitude of fifty meters, looking down at Aldebaran.

Rentaro locked onto the monster below them and like a multistage rocket, he kicked away from Enju's body midair, rushing down headfirst. At the same time, he lit the percussion fuse in his artificial arm—another Unlimited Burst. The extractor pulled out empty shells one after another as the ejector kicked them all out behind him. His body rotated in the air from the centrifugal force, and he swung his fist like a dive bomber.

"Gooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" Rentaro's fist sank into Aldebaran's abdomen. A moment later, a deeper depression split open Aldebaran's enormous body. Behind it, the ground jumped with a spiderweb of cracks running through it.

Rentaro's whole body was dyed red, covered by a huge amount of hot blood.

A scream unleashed from Aldebaran's vocal cords, blasting Rentaro's eardrums.

As his arm holding the EP bomb buried into Aldebaran's abdomen, it continued wildly from the intense propulsion, as he expected. Feeling it go through organs, he twisted the can of the EP bomb to activate the timed fuse. At the same time, he felt around the back of his artificial arm with his left hand and pushed a button, turned it counterclockwise, and braced his legs.

Suddenly, there was a hiss and the connection between the artificial arm and

his flesh was separated. His arm, which had turned into a mass of propulsion, continued to go deeper into Aldebaran's body separated from Rentaro's will, cutting through flesh and carving up bone.

Immediately, the cavity left by the path of the artificial arm rose and stuck together as it healed.

Rentaro stared at the place where the artificial arm had attacked as it disappeared. Finally, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and yelled into the radio. "The EP bomb has been set inside Aldebaran. It will explode in three minutes. Everyone, quickly get out of the range of its blast!"

He promptly faced Enju. "Enju, I'm counting on you."

Enju hugged his side and made a few short jumps. In no time, they were behind a giant boulder tens of meters away.

Rentaro checked the time. There were thirty seconds left. When he peeked out from behind the shadow of the boulder, he saw that there was smoke rising from Aldebaran's wound as it finished healing, but there was a scar left behind at the place of attack, leaving a marker for where the bomb was buried.

When there were less than ten seconds left, Rentaro put his back flat up against the boulder. His heart pounded as it sent blood through his body. He was so nervous, he felt like his heart was going to jump out of his mouth.

In order to bear the shock of the explosion, he closed his eyes tightly, put his hands over his ears, and gritted his teeth.

Three, two, one. Zero……

"Huh?" He opened his eyes in surprise and hurriedly checked the time.

And then—

The predicted time of the blast came and went without fanfare.

He was filled with panic. Was the explosion delayed? Did he mishear the timing of the explosion when Miori was telling him about it? Or was it something else —? Various possibilities passed through his mind, but then he realized that he just did not want to accept the most likely possibility.

It didn't go off. After all this, it didn't explode.

The strength left him from his lower body, and he fell to his knees with his eyes still wide open. Sticking his face out from behind the boulder, he saw the struggling Aldebaran lift up its body and look for Rentaro and the others as it shook its head.

This was the end. Tokyo Area would be overrun. Everyone would die.

“Rentaro.” As he tilted his head listlessly, he saw Enju crossing her arms in front of her chest worriedly.

He shifted his gaze away from her and looked down. The plan had failed. He just couldn’t bring himself to tell her it.

He felt like his heart was going to tear apart. It was a battle they were not allowed to lose. He even swore to her: that he would save Tokyo Area.

Just then, a thought flashed through his brain like a lightning bolt. *No, there was a way. There was just one way.*

What had Miori said when she was explaining how to use the EP bomb?

“If you twist the EP bomb itself to this notch, it will explode three minutes later. It will be more sensitive at that point, so after you twist the can, make sure you do not let it undergo any strong shocks.”

That’s right. A strong shock.

There was another way to set off the bomb than by using the timed fuse. However, unlike the timed fuse, setting it off with a shock would make it explode immediately. In addition to having to work close by, there was no way to run away from the explosion.

In order to do this, they would definitely have to sacrifice one person.

Before he knew it, a sigh of resignation escaped from his lips, and his body cooled down, paying no mind to the turmoil in his heart. Rentaro closed his eyes slowly and let out a long breath. It had taken him an unbelievably short amount of time to prepare himself.

Around him was the sound of flames burning. The sound of fighting. The stink of living things burning. His lungs burned every time he took a breath. His throat was dry. And for some reason, all of this felt so dear and irreplaceable.

Rentaro got down to his knees, made his eyes level with Enju's, and gave her a hug, putting his chin on her shoulder. He whispered quietly into her ear. "Enju, good-bye."

"Why?"

"I always wanted to be someone who was suitable for you. After I took you in, I didn't know anything about raising a child, so I was completely absorbed in it. I didn't know anything, but I can say right now—it was fun."

Enju moved her arm from around Rentaro's shoulders and grabbed his uniform hard, wrinkling it. She must have noticed, too. "Why are you saying that right now?"

"In this year since we met, I was happy. I was even able to almost like the power of my artificial limbs that I hated before. I'm truly glad that I met you."

At Rentaro's chest, a small head shook and squeezed out a thin voice. Enju was crying. "Don't go."

"Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 13—"

"Stop!"

"—*Senkuu Renen*." There was a sharp sound, and Enju's body floated into the air. The force of Rentaro's fist, which punched into her at point-blank range, was thoroughly transferred to her body. Enju's once-crimson eyes turned black and wavered as if urging him to do something. Her knees folded, and she leaned on Rentaro.

Rentaro put his arm behind the unconscious Enju's head and lowered her slowly to the ground, careful not to let her head fall too hard. Then, he stood up. He lifted his face and watched motionlessly as Aldebaran went wild on the battlefield of hellfire.

The timed fuse did not go off. The only way left was to detonate it with a shock.

The Stage Four Gastrea, Aldebaran, would have to be eliminated by the suicide bombing of IP Rank 300, Rentaro Satomi.

Fortunately, one person was enough to accomplish this. There was no need for

two people. Rentaro took a final look at the unconscious Enju and resolutely started to walk toward the monsters' general. The wind blew, and his cloak, which had become ragged in the battle, fluttered.

He had thought that this day would come one day. He knew that if he continued this fateful occupation, one day, the long hand of Hades would catch him.

The time has come. Accomplish your duty, Rentaro Satomi.

The burnt scar was a good landmark showing him the position of where the bomb was buried. However, in order to apply a shock to the EP bomb buried deep in the enemy's body, he would have to deliver quite an intense blow. He had already lost his right arm. He had no cartridges left in his legs. His whole body was injured. He was wounded all over. His mobility was significantly decreased.

However, he had no choice but to do it.

He stopped, feeling the sensation of gravel getting stuck in the bottoms of his shoes. He sucked the hot air of the battlefield into his hurting lungs; they felt like flames.

"I'm right here."

Aldebaran noticed him again.

His target was thirty meters ahead. The monster gave a loud war cry that violently shook the earth and then waved its tentacles desperately.

At the same time, Rentaro started running all-out with the last of his strength.

The tentacles of the giant Gastrea that moved at the speed of sound came down at the earth like meteors.

Rentaro avoided the first attack by jumping to the side. However, two more attacks came down as Aldebaran predicted Rentaro's evasion.

Rentaro gave a beastly yell and ran away, escaping in the nick of time. A piece of bedrock that had come off flew into his temple, and his vision shook violently. He almost lost consciousness from the pain, but he gritted his teeth and somehow managed to stay awake.

However, that was all a trick.

When the curtain of tentacles opened up and his vision cleared, he saw green mucus on the open mouthparts of Aldebaran. Rentaro felt chills down his spine. Abruptly, he lifted his arm to protect himself, but he had covered the wrong place.

His artificial right leg, which had been showered with mucus, started to steam and slowly bleached. His eyes widened as he tried to figure out what was going on, but he soon realized the truth and ground his teeth at his critical mistake.

It was Varanium corrosion liquid. In that case, he thought he would do it before his leg corroded, and he started another fierce dash. As he watched, Aldebaran's enormous body loomed as it drew nearer.

Beyond the eight short, fat legs like stone pillars, Rentaro saw the scar where he had hit it before. If he applied shock to that area, the bomb would probably detonate.

There were now less than ten meters between him and Aldebaran.

Just a little farther. Once Rentaro got under its torso, it wouldn't be able to attack him. As long as he could get there…

However, Rentaro suddenly lost his balance and stumbled over nothing.

Huh? Still not knowing what was going on, the ground drew nearer, and he fell heavily into the mud face-first, groaning.

Rentaro looked hesitatingly at his right leg. "N…no…way…"

It was gone. There was nothing past his thigh on his right leg. There was just a pile of white ash shaped like a leg that had fallen like a bad joke. His artificial leg, made of the pinnacle next-generation metal, Super-Varanium alloy, was completely gone.

His whole body trembled. Without that, he could not walk. Without that—

Just then, Aldebaran suddenly turned its back to Rentaro, and its tail swung toward him at a terrible speed. Centrifugal force sent mud flying as it approached. Immediately, Rentaro rolled into the hollowed-out area near him that was shaped like a mortar.

A fierce roar grazed him. He had avoided being hit directly, but the shock wave given off by the tail sent Rentaro's body flying into the air like a diseased leaf, and he was thrown, back first, into a standing boulder.

There was an unpleasant crack, and he slowly fell off the boulder and slid to the ground, falling face-first into the mud. He felt pressure all over his body when he breathed, like he had broken at least a few ribs and couldn't get enough oxygen into his lungs. His breaths became short and shallow. Even when he put his hands on the ground and forced himself up, the next instant, he violently coughed up blood and a red flower bloomed on the muddy ground.

Rentaro wiped his mouth in disbelief and then opened his fingers in front of his eyes to look at his bloody palm. Suddenly, strength left his arm like a string had been cut, and his whole body fell down. Cold sweat oozed from his pores. Even though he felt like he was in a hurry, no matter how much he tried, he couldn't muster the strength to move his body even an inch.

Finally, he was unable to move anything of his own free will, and he turned slowly, head over heels, in the mud.

He thought he was going to die.

Lady Luck had left him. However, there had been no way it was going to go well from the start. There were things in this world that just weren't meant to be. The fate of mass extinction was just one of those things. That was how it was.

His vision distorted. Everything was painted black with despair, and his eyelids grew heavy.

"Satomi, you're really beat up, huh?"

"Huh?" Just then, there was a thud, and his vision was filled with the fluttering hem of a long coat. His senior disciple, wearing a visor and white coat, had his back to him. "Sh…Sho…ma… Why…?"

"I understand the situation. I'll go."

"No… It's…impossible… You'd have to…apply a shock…deep…into its body…" After saying that much, Rentaro gave a start.

“Have you forgotten, Satomi? My technique is considered heresy. It has the power to destroy an object from the inside out.”

His thoughts were distant, but he desperately shook his head. “N…can’t… No… you can’t… Shoma, bro…you’ll die…”

“Satomi, you saw my technique, too, didn’t you? It was a sinister technique that twisted the Tendo style. It must be sealed into the depths of the earth. It’s just as Master Sukekiyo said—I did actually realize it a long time ago. But it just took me too long to act on it.”

Shoma put his arm around the helpless Rentaro and brought him to the back of a small, nearby hill. Shoma didn’t say anything else as he turned his back to Rentaro and ran off.

Rentaro stretched out his hand, but it wouldn’t reach. He tried to call out to stop him, but his voice was hoarse and no sound came out.

Shoma was going to go away again. Even though Rentaro hadn’t wanted to sacrifice anyone else. Even though he had been fighting for a bright future where no one else would have to die.

After a while, loud war cries and rumbles in the ground continued from the other side of the hill, but Rentaro had no way of knowing how things were going. He gritted his teeth and dragged himself desperately with his remaining arm, crawling to the top of the hill. He saw that the fight between Aldebaran and Shoma had reached its climax.

Shoma moved with a superhuman agility and dodged literally all of Aldebaran’s continuous attacks, going under its torso.

“Noooooooo, Shoma, Shomaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Rentaro couldn’t see after that, but he was sure that Shoma did what he had to do.

Suddenly, the sound disappeared from his ears, and there was a glint and a ball of fire that dazzled his eyes. He was blown away by the hot shock wave and rolled over and over down the back of the hill.

And then, he saw it. The fireball that came from the EP bomb stretched

vertically from the rising air current and became a giant mushroom shape that sucked up all the dust and structures from the surface of the ground.

“Shoma! Shoma! Naaaaaaaaaaaaah!” With a dreadful roar, a shock wave violently swept across the sky. Rentaro screamed into the sky until his throat was ragged.

2

Someone was rocking his body as they cried. Warm drops of water fell on his cheeks, his forehead, and his mouth and flowed down into his throat. It was salty.

And then he realized: *Oh, I’m alive*.

Opening his eyes slightly, he was able to see the silhouette even more clearly. It was a girl with pigtails that looked like bunny ears. Regretfully, he thought that even though he hadn’t wanted to make her cry anymore, he had done it again.

His cheeks were slapped, and his slowly sinking consciousness rose to the surface again. His eyes focused, and the coordinates of his consciousness became even more distinct. He vaguely noticed that the sky behind him was growing bright. Apparently, it was almost dawn.

“En…ju…”

Enju took a sharp breath. She didn’t speak. Her mouth turned down at the corners, and she seemed determined not to cry anymore, but it twisted her face into a strange expression. Her eyes were wet, her mouth opened and closed silently, but then suddenly, she pulled her head back, and of all things, she started head butting him over and over.

There was a sound that brought him back to reality, and he saw stars. “Gahhhh! I-idiot… What’re you doing, you ten-year-old baby?” He pushed the top half of his body up with momentum and then scowled at the pain that came with that movement.

After checking his own body, he wasn’t surprised. Of course, his artificial limbs were gone, and his whole body was covered with burns and injuries, and his cloak and uniform were both scorched. He didn’t have a mirror, so he didn’t

know, but his face was probably also black with soot.

Enju glared at him with resentment as she rubbed her forehead, which also must've hurt. "I had too many things to complain about to express in words, so I head butted you without thinking."

"Don't head butt me."

"I have about a thousand things to say to you. First of all—" Enju looked like she wanted to argue vehemently more, but Rentaro held down her arm and looked around.

"Enju, sorry. I'll listen to that later. What happened with the war? Sorry, but can I lean on your shoulder? I can't stand on my own."

Enju made a face that showed how she thought about that, but then she did take his shoulder silently as she stood up. With Enju's help, he climbed to the top of the small hill. Apparently, it was the highest hill in the area, and nothing blocked his view in any direction. The world spread out at Rentaro's feet.

"What is this…?"

Where Aldebaran had been, there was a giant crater, still smoldering and sending up white smoke, with the bottom completely red, like lava. Aldebaran had been exterminated without a trace. So had Shoma Nagisawa…

"Enju, what about the remaining Gastrea? Did we defeat them…?"

"Yup. The movements of the Gastrea went strange after that explosion, and each one became really easy to kill. Most of them ran outside of the Monolith, though."

Just then, there were shouts behind his back, and he turned to look.

"Big Brother!"

"Satomi!"

He saw Tina and Kisara running toward them. Following their voices, the civil officers in the area looking for survivors gathered.

Tamaki and Yuzuki were also safe. Asaka was sorrowful at losing yet another Promoter. The splatters of blood on Kagetane's and Kohina's clothes from their

victims told of their impressive war results.

But, as if they already knew that Shoma was no longer of this world, starting with Kisara, none of the members of his adjuvant seemed to want to meet his eyes.

“Is this all? Is this all that’s left?” In contrast to the nine members of Rentaro’s party who survived, he could only see six others here and there. When they had started Operation Rapier Thrust, they had attacked with a hundred or so civil officers at the same time. And now, there were only fifteen left. Had he let the rest die?

Just then, he felt light at his back and turned around, and he saw bands of the first light of day peek out from between the clouds in the eastern sky as the azure heavens were slowly dyed with the colors of the dawn.

The faint beauty of the deep navy sky being dyed light blue shook him; the beauty of nature in the infinite gradation swallowed him up. It had been four days since the thick clouds from the bleached Monolith had covered the sky and they had seen the sun.

However, what the sun’s rays exposed in broad daylight was not a warm paradise. There were mountains of corpses of large and small Gastrea, and between them were remains of civil officers so damaged that it was hard to tell what their original shape was. There were streams of blood here and there that joined to form a small river.

Spilled guts had rolled on the ground and were covered in mud, and gray matter had mixed together with it, turning the surface of the ground pink. The eyes the flies swarmed around could no longer see. The stink of burnt flesh and hair spread and permeated into the survivors’ skin. It would be hard to get that smell out. Rentaro didn’t think it would go away for some time, no matter how many times he bathed.

That supremely appalling scene spread as far as the eye could see. This was what had become of the heroes who fought to defeat the Gastrea. This was the fate of those fools who had been tempted by the name of protecting Tokyo Area and had ended up being tossed into the pit of hell.

Rentaro Satomi had tried to make a heaven of this hell where the Gastrea

walked. Even so, what was this scene that spread before his eyes? How could he say for sure that what he did wasn't just to cross over hell with another hell?

If you kill one person, you're a murderer. If you kill a hundred, you're a hero. If you kill everything, then apparently, you're a god.

Rentaro was not a god.

But he wasn't human, or a murderer, either.

Rentaro had become a hero by accident. He had become a symbol. He had become hope for others. When he had been called a hero after the Kagetane Hiruko incident, it hadn't really sunk in, but now he understood.

I see… So Rentaro Satomi is a hero.

He was sure that the mountains of corpses and river of blood were a living hell that the clowns called heroes would have to see for the rest of their lives.

Rentaro could feel Enju's warmth next to him. When he went back to the agency, Kisara and Tina would come out to meet him.

Then what was this desolation blowing through the hole in his heart? Why did his heart feel like it was going to rip apart with loneliness even when he was surrounded by the smiles of so many of his friends?

He was sure that he would spend more nights coughing up blood and sleepless with fear as he pursued the truth. That's why he was sure the truth would not make him happy. When he saw the Ardi File in Sumire's lab, he was even more certain.

However, it wasn't like he could just stop. If he surrendered here, what would come of the prayers of Kayo Senju, who passed away leaving her future to Rentaro, or the wishes of Midori Fuse, or the hope of Shoma Nagisawa? In order to make sure their deaths were not in vain, he did not have the option of stepping down now.

Just then, he suddenly heard noise in the air behind him and turned to see helicopters coming toward them. They had probably requisitioned all the helicopters in Tokyo Area. The helicopters had reinforced nets of rectangular blocks of Varanium hanging from them.

The amazing number of helicopters flying toward them in formation covered the sky as they flew over the heads of Rentaro and the others, heading toward the remains of the mountain of ash left by the collapsed Monolith. They would probably work through the day and night to construct the Monolith.

Rentaro squinted again at the light of dawn. From now on, how many valleys of tears would he cross? How many fields and hills of despair? And what lay in store for him beyond them?

Only God knew.

REPORT OF THE THIRD KANTO BATTLE

The accumulated damage of Tokyo Area from the successive battles against the Gastrea Scorpion at the end of April 2031 and the Gastrea Aldebaran in July of the same year are as follows:

Tokyo Area Ground Self-Defense Force—attenuation loss of 83%.

Tokyo Area Maritime Self-Defense Force—attenuation loss of 45%.

Tokyo Area Air Self-Defense Force—attenuation loss of 95%.

Tokyo Area officially registered civil security officer pairs—attenuation loss of 43%.

Adjuvant members with tremendous battle results received the following promotions in rank:

Takami Katagiri and Yuzuki Katagiri pair—promoted from IP rank 1,850 to 1,000.

Kisara Tendo and Tina Sprout pair—promoted from IP rank 9,200 to 3,500.

Rentaro Satomi and Enju Aihara pair—promoted from IP rank 300 to 200.

Initiator Asaka Mibu is currently under the care of the International Initiator Supervision Organization, due to the death of her Promoter.

Kagetane Hiruko and Kohina Hiruko, who were thought to have participated in the battle, disappeared immediately after the incident.

Their whereabouts are unknown.

End report.

Tokyo Area decided that it would be difficult to protect their country on their own and invited strong civil officers from overseas by promising priority access to Varanium supplies. Tokyo Area became the first model case of a nation reversing their presumed fate of mass extinction after the collapse of a Monolith.

EPILOGUE VENGEANCE IS MINE

The somewhat musical cry of a cuckoo could be heard. It was 5 p.m., and the sunset was dazzling. Kazumitsu Tendo was accompanied by his secretary, Kazumi Shiina, walking quickly to leave the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and hurrying to his destination.

The moment they stepped outside, they were met with a stuffy heat that wrapped around their whole bodies, and he suddenly wanted to call a limousine like he usually did, but that was something that he just couldn't do today, he told himself.

It was then that he realized that his Armani necktie was crooked and he fixed it with an irritated hand. It was an error his normal self would never have made. He had been like this since the morning, and he couldn't even put his mind to his work.

He couldn't bear the sweat anymore and took off his suit jacket, looking up in the direction of the faraway Monolith, where on a sunny day, he should have been able to see a corner of it. However, even though the weather was nice today, there was no sign of the Monolith.

That was to be expected. The collapsed Monolith 32 was currently only restored to about six hundred meters tall, and it would still be some time before it would be completely restored to its original 1,618 meters.

It had been two weeks since the incident, and summer had returned to Tokyo Area. When the ashes from the Monolith had covered the sky and the temperature had dropped suddenly, he had mistakenly yearned for summer, but now that the hot weather had returned like he had wanted, it felt like an

extension of reality and made him irritated.

No, he shook his head. Unusual days were still continuing. At least, they were for Kazumitsu.

He felt a sharp pain in his stomach again due to stress. Such pain had been Kazumitsu's companion since the day he received the report that Aldebaran was clinging onto Monolith 32. And the place where Kazumitsu and Shiina were going was a place with deep connections to that matter.

They changed trains and got off at Tokyo Area Outer District, District 37. The exit was deserted. It went without saying that once it became night in a few hours, it would be suicide to stay overnight here in this place full of abandoned buildings with no streetlights.

Kazumitsu and Shiina walked for a while until they stood in front of a dilapidated dojo. It was a one-story building with a high ceiling, and the house part was half-destroyed. On the sign hanging outside was written Tendo Style with free-flowing brushstrokes written by Sukekiyo Tendo, who was also a calligrapher.

The Tendo Style was originally a very insular school that was only passed down within the Tendo family, but there had been a few dojos that were open to outsiders, and this was one of those few.

Seeing the blasted edifice, Kazumitsu sighed. It might be over for the Tendo Style. Giving Shiina an order, he opened the half-collapsed door and stood in the doorway. He hesitated for a moment before deciding to enter with his shoes on.

And then, he opened the sliding door and saw her in the middle of the wide tatami-mat dojo, her murderous blade Yukikage sheathed and stuck into the ground. She had both hands folded on top of the hilt and was standing with her legs slightly apart.

She slowly raised her face. "Welcome, Brother Kazumitsu. Or should I call you vice minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism?"

"Kisara…" He never thought he would ever say his little sister's name with such hatred.

The evening sun shone in slanted rays on her glossy, straight, jet-black hair,

making it shine in contrast to her porcelain white skin. Kisara Tendo stood there with her thigh-high socks and black sailor-school uniform. That more than anything proved that this would be the location of a fight to the death.

At the side of the dojo wall was a familiar face he hadn't seen in a while. "What, you brought children with you, Rentaro?" Kazumitsu said it malignantly, but Rentaro just continued to look nervous and did not answer. Next to him were two equally nervous-looking girls, one with pigtails and the other with blond hair. The girls were probably Rentaro's and Kisara's Initiators.

"Brother, did you refrain from telling anyone that you were coming here, as you promised?" Kisara asked him.

Kazumitsu shrugged his shoulders. "Thanks to that, I came on my own two feet without calling for a car. What about you? You brought what you promised, right?"

"Are you talking about this?" Saying that, she pulled out a bundle of papers from her chest and threw them at Kazumitsu's feet.

He pretended to be calm, but inside, he wanted to groan. He had Shiina pick up the documents and took them, flipping through them one by one.

Unmistakable evidence was laid out in front of Kazumitsu. "Damn it, where in the world did you get this?"

Kisara scoffed and chuckled. "I just happened to find it."

"There's no way you could *find* it. This was all supposed to have been disposed of!"

"Even so, I found it. Even I still have some connections I trust that I can use."

Kazumitsu was taken aback and glared at Kisara. "You little… You snuck into the Tendo vault, didn't you?"

Kisara shrugged as she smiled. "Shall we continue with our discussion, Brother?"

Kazumitsu didn't say anything.

"While we were fighting in the Third Kanto Battle, we kept thinking it was strange. How was Aldebaran able to cling to the Monolith if it was no more than

a Stage Four? At first, we thought it might have been because of where it was situated or because of a special ability Aldebaran had. However, after a while, we considered the idea that something could be wrong with Monolith 32 itself. And then after looking into it, just as expected, I found something strange. You were the one responsible for ordering Monolith 32 built at the end of the Great Gastrea War, weren't you, Brother Kazumitsu?"

Kazumitsu still didn't say anything.

Kisara narrowed her eyes like a cat cornering its prey, spread her arms sadistically, and continued. "Up until now, public works projects have used a general bidding system to prevent corruption and collusion, but because of that, it can be quite complicated. For construction projects like the Monoliths, where speed is more important than anything, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism is responsible for gathering general contractors and directing the construction.

"It's not like I have objections to this system in general. However, Brother, I cannot appreciate how you had filler materials mixed with Varanium in order to make the Monoliths more cheaply, using the leftover money to line your pockets."

Kazumitsu gave a start, and his fist shook.

"Of course, the Varanium with filler materials in it had a lower degree of purity and gave off less of the magnetic field that Gastrea hate. Because of that, it's possible that certain Gastrea can overcome the magnetic field of a weakened Monolith and cling to it."

"Theoretically, that level of purity should have still been good enough! In reality, Monolith 32 stood for these past ten years, didn't it?!"

"But it did not work against Aldebaran."

Kazumitsu gulped.

Kisara lifted the corners of her mouth and smiled, concluding ruthlessly, "You were the one who created the trigger for the Gastrea Aldebaran to come and start the Third Kanto Battle, Brother Kazumitsu."

Kazumitsu's nails dug into his palm as he squeezed his fist, breaking the skin

and allowing blood to well up. He wanted to shut this woman's mouth up immediately. It was a feeling that was hard to get rid of.

"But isn't it ironic? Even though citizens of Tokyo Area who didn't win the lottery for shelter tickets couldn't sleep at night and shook with fear at the thought of being slaughtered by the Gastrea, because *you* are considered a VIP in this nation, you and your whole family received shelter tickets. So when we civil officers were desperately fighting for our lives, you were snug inside the shelter. What do you think the citizens of Tokyo Area would think if they knew this fact?"

"…Do you have copies of these documents?"

"No. That is the only copy."

"Are you telling me to believe you?"

"I am believing that nonsense you spouted about how you didn't tell anyone that you were going to come here today, so shouldn't we call it a gentlemen's agreement?"

Kazumitsu snorted. "I didn't think my opponent in this fight to the death would be preaching to me about a gentlemen's agreement."

Kisara smiled back ruthlessly. "I don't care, but I suppose I'll at least ask: Why did you mix filler materials into the Varanium? Don't you have more money than you know what to do with already?"

Kazumitsu snorted again. "Kisara, you don't know anything. In order to be successful in life, more money is needed than you can imagine. Bosses have many different desires. Like wanting to hunt people with a rifle, or wanting to have a three-way with twin virgins, or wanting to star in a snuff film to kill someone. It takes an enormous amount of money to make the desires of bosses like that come true."

A new expression crossed Kisara's face. "Hearing you say it straight out like that disgusts me. You wanted money in order to make desires like *that* come true?"

"That's right. And I used that money to make those bosses owe me. I was able to become the vice minister of LITT not just because I had the shield of Tendo

behind me.”

Kisara’s eyes, which were narrowed with hatred, became even sharper. “Scum of the earth like you should have died during the first War.”

“Hah.” This time, Kazumitsu sneered. “You don’t know anything, Kisara. True villains do not die. They throw money around, and then while ‘Death’ is desperately picking it up, they make their escape.”

Kisara suddenly closed her eyes and then took her time opening them slowly. “Another reason to let you live is gone now. That is enough. Let us begin. Will the two witnesses please come forward?”

Kazumitsu pushed Shiina up. Apparently, Kisara’s witness was Rentaro. The two of them went between Kazumitsu and Kisara and stood facing each other. Shiina raised her right hand and swore first. “I, Kazumi Shiina, am a witness to this duel, and even if one side dies, I swear that I will not call the police or any other judicial authorities.”

After seeing Shiina’s oath, Kazumitsu and Kisara naturally turned their eyes toward Rentaro. Rentaro had a pained expression on his face as he slowly raised his right hand, but then he immediately shook his head.

“Wait a minute, you two! Let me ask one last thing. Do you really have to fight like this? Even I’m interested in a fight between two master initiates of the Tendo Style. But that should be done with wooden or bamboo swords. Not with real blades!”

“You’re talking too much, Rentaro!” hissed Kazumitsu. “If I don’t shut this woman’s mouth now, she’ll blab the truth. There’s no way I can allow her to live!”

“But Brother Kazumitsu—”

“Don’t call me your brother. If you’re on Kisara’s side, then you’re an enemy of Tendo. Rentaro, open your eyes. She’s tricking you. That woman is a monster!”

“Let me do it, Satomi,” said Kisara. “I’ve been waiting for ten years. I’ve finally cornered one of the people I need to kill to avenge Father’s and Mother’s deaths. My fight with this man is fated.”

Rentaro opened his mouth to argue, but in the end he just said, “Damn it,” and gritted his teeth. Finally, he raised his right arm and swore the oath. When he and Shiina finished the vows, they withdrew to the side of the walls, and only Kazumitsu and Kisara were left in the center of the wide dojo.

Kazumitsu gave directions to his secretary with a jerk of his chin. She pulled out a spear from one of the two spear bags and threw it at him. Kazumitsu caught it with one hand. The spear came up to around his chest. When he held the spear, energy seemed to flow into his body from it and fill him with breath. His former feelings came back—confidence welled up, making him feel like he could take over the world with just one spear.

Kisara shrugged scornfully. “Don’t tell me you’re really fighting with just a spear, Brother? I was sure that you would at least sneak in a gun…”

“Don’t be mistaken. I don’t need to rely on projectile weapons just to pierce *your* heart.”

Just then, Kazumitsu noticed Kisara’s ample chest shake and looked her up and down as if licking her. “Kisara, one of my bosses said he just slept with a dark-skinned girl kidnapped from one of the countries he passed through, and now he wants a pale girl. If I defeat you without killing you, can I pull off your arms and legs and give you to him?”

Kisara chuckled. “Sure. In exchange, if I defeat you without killing you, maybe I’ll feed you alive to some pigs.”

Kisara dropped her hips, narrowed her eyes, and took a stance with an expression of carnage. Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style, Nirvana Stance—the stance encompassed all the offense and defense of the Tendo Sword Drawing Styles by being in a state of constant change and existing freely in that state. “I’ve been waiting for this day for ten years. Taste the depth of my resentment and despair and die.”

Kazumitsu also took a stance. Tendo Martial Arts Divine Spear Style, Perfect Serenity Stance—the stance encompassed all the offense and defense of the Tendo Martial Arts Divine Spear Styles by abandoning all the cares in one’s heart and achieving a state of nothingness, leaving the heart clean and serene. “I’m glad, Kisara. Even if we had different mothers, I’m glad I can bond like this with

my little sister. I'll let you practice with me, so come at me."

The atmosphere inside the dojo changed in an instant to one of tension.

"Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Styles Master Initiate, Kisara Tendo."

"Tendo Martial Arts Divine Spear Styles Master Initiate, Kazumitsu Tendo."

After saying their names, they both jumped back a step and faced off. Seeing Kisara take an offensive position, the Virtuous Heart Stance, without a moment's delay, Kazumitsu took a defensive position, the Iron Will Stance. When he did, Kisara flowed smoothly into the Nirvana Stance, and seeing that, Kazumitsu skillfully took the offensive position, Mythical Beasts Stance. It was Kisara's turn to be on the receiving end, and she transitioned into the defensive Moonlit Heart Stance.

Kazumitsu watched Kisara's movements in silent admiration. Her transitions from one form to another were seamless and could even be called beautiful. He had been sure the blood would rush to her head and she would rush at him like a wild boar, but he was wrong. *She might be a tougher opponent than I thought*, he reconsidered.

Because it was a fight between fellow students of the Tendo Style, they knew each other's hands completely, so naturally, there was a tendency to decrease the number of pointless moves and read ahead to predict each other's moves.

And in Tendo Style, there was a paradigm of strategies where one must break down the other person's form by repeating moves in defensive position against someone in offensive position, using moves in neutral position against an opponent in defensive position, and using moves in offensive position against someone in neutral position, rules that created a three-way deadlock. It was like how snakes were scared of slugs, slugs scared of frogs, and frogs scared of snakes.

A fight between two people well-versed in this theory was a dizzying series of changes from form to form. From the sidelines, it almost looked like a martial arts demonstration. However, in these changes of position without an exchange of swords, if one was even a split second late, then it would create an opening and the match would be decided in that moment. That was why they had to change positions with a smooth flow.

Kisara was doing them with near perfection, to the point that they could be called beautiful. Kazumitsu had to admit it as well—that Kisara Tendo's abilities were on par with his own. It was as he thought this that he understood: In this fight, the first attack would decide it all.

Outside, the chorus of cicadas was noisy, but inside was completely the opposite—there was almost no sound inside the room. The two of them changed forms silently, their shifting weight making the rotting tatami creak slightly. That was the only sound that filled their world.

Kazumitsu wondered how many times they repeated the cycle of offense and defense. Just then, Kisara abruptly broke her form and let the strength leave her, only to lunge and raise her arm, sword and all, taking a stance he had never seen before. It was a form that connected drawing the sword to a downward slashing attack.

"What is that form…?" The words came out of his mouth involuntarily. Rentaro also looked like he was dumbfounded. He was frozen with his mouth gaping open.

Kisara spoke with a dignified expression. "I'll tell you the name of it at least, Brother. This is called the Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style, Dragon and Tiger Twin Attack Stance. I invented this form to obliterate all the Tendos."

"You…created a form…?" Simmering anger welled up in him and before he knew it, Kazumitsu was screaming. "What the hell?! It is inexcusable to add your own arrangement to Master Sukekiyo's techniques! You should be ashamed, Kisara!"

Kisara chuckled, looking at him with scorn. "Don't you think *you're* mistaken about something, Brother? Master initiates are allowed to create techniques and teach them. Well, I don't think someone who only has enough talent to swallow what they're taught and adhere to them can possibly reach that level of thinking."

Kazumitsu's spear hand shook with anger. As if he would let her say what she wanted… He wouldn't let this woman say any more.

"Shiina!" He called his secretary. She guessed what he wanted and pulled out a spear from the other bag. It looked heavy when she threw it to him. Kazumitsu

threw away the spear in his hand and switched to the longer, more sinister-looking weapon.

It was so strangely shaped that one almost hesitated to call it a spear. At its tip was a double-edged spearhead with four notches on it, and a crescent blade that practically surrounded it on all four sides. On top of that, there were four weights attached to the crescent by chains.

Even if Kisara evaded the tip of the spear, the crescent blade would cut her, and even if she evaded the crescent blade, the weights would crush her bones. The spear looked as if it were a flower with petals blooming around the stamens and pistil in the middle. Yes, this was the Spear Flower—*Kontensetsu*.

Stab, cut, strike. It was a special combination weapon that could do all three at once, and like a scimitar or Chinese halberd, it required its wielder to be very skillful and have a strong physique.

“I didn’t want to use this, Kisara. I didn’t want to use such a treasured weapon to cut a whore like you.”

Kisara just silently narrowed her eyes.

Kazumitsu took a stance—the Mythical Beasts Spear Stance. Kazumitsu daringly chose an offensive form for this deciding round.

Kisara’s Dragon and Tiger Twin Attack Stance was clearly either offensive or neutral, but Kazumitsu’s instincts judged that this was as offensive form. If that were the case, then attacking in a defensive position would be the standard move.

However, Kisara said she created the Dragon and Tiger Twin Attack Stance to kill Tendos. In that case, he could probably assume that it was an innovative form that could break through the defensive form.

Kazumitsu also decided to abandon the standard reply to this situation.

The onlookers held their breaths and didn’t move an inch. The evening sun slanting in from the window made the dust in the air sparkle. The tense atmosphere filled with a thirst for blood was enough to make a normal person go mad.

Beads of sweat appeared on Kazumitsu's forehead, and they dripped down the tip of his nose. He looked back at the image of himself reflected in the glass. A tall and lean man with a slender face. This year, he would turn thirty-nine, but he looked about ten years younger than his real age. His physical age was even younger.

Kazumitsu asked himself, *Am I going to lose?*

He replied immediately: *No, that is impossible.*

He was a superelite who was born in the Tendo family and had been promised success. He was made to govern people. There was no way he was going to rot away in this dirty dojo that was less than a pigsty. He was not the kind of person who would fall like this.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" With a piercing scream, Kazumitsu launched his attack. With a powerful step, he thrust.

Tendo Martial Arts Divine Spear Third Style, Number 1: *Amako Genmeika*.

With a thrust that could have been called too honest and a Tendo-style step, he brought down the spear with a powerful stroke and incredible speed. With the addition of the compounding effects of his spear, Kontensetsu, there was enough force to kill Kisara ten times over.

Kisara also drew the murderous blade from its scabbard fractions of a second later, but it was too late.

Kontensetsu was expecting to bring certain death—but impossibly, there was a screech of steel and it was repelled upward.

"What?!" Kazumitsu suddenly jumped backward. Both sides were uninjured.

Kazumitsu was shaken by the fact that his special technique was repelled, but he had gotten an unexpected chance to regroup. Thinking that he would definitely rip her to pieces the next time, he kicked off the ground again.

Just then, a shocked expression came over Kisara's face.

Thinking he could do it, Kazumitsu advanced again to thrust his spear forward.

But then, he realized that he had misunderstood Kisara's shocked expression. The next instant, his vision shook violently, and he felt like he had lost control of

his legs. He was thrown forward by inertia for some reason and fell, and the tatami rushed toward him, filling his view.

He couldn't even take a defensive position as he fell face-first into the rotting tatami mat. The match had been decided before the person fighting in it even realized.

Kazumitsu had not realized that he had already been defeated.

The instant the match was decided, Rentaro let out an involuntary groan. The match of Tendo Styles was decided in one attack, just as Rentaro had predicted. And it meant the inescapable defeat of the Tendo Martial Arts Divine Spear Style.

The fallen Kazumitsu looked up at Kisara with an expression of incomprehension. "Guh, Kisara, why am I… What happened to the match? Did I lose?"

Kisara looked down at him coolly. "You have not even realized that, have you, Brother? Why don't you check your legs?"

"My…legs?" After she said that, Kazumitsu slowly shifted his gaze to his legs.

Hearing Kazumitsu's heartrending scream, Rentaro wanted to cover his face. Kazumitsu's legs from the thigh down had disappeared cleanly. It was as if they had abandoned their master and had been thrown far backward into the wall.

"Brother, you didn't even realize your legs had been cut off and tried to step toward me. I was so surprised, I almost laughed."

As if they just remembered to bleed, Kazumitsu's legs started spurting blood, and the surface of the tatami mats turned into a pool of hell.

Rentaro looked at the scene dumbfounded, shaking. He considered—Who was the strongest member of the Tendo Civil Security Agency? Was it himself, who possessed the abilities of a mechanized solider? Or Enju, who manifested the superhuman physical powers of the Cursed Children? Or Tina, who had the qualities of both?

"Papa, no! She's the most dangerous out of everyone here!"

The night before Operation Rapier Thrust, when Tina and Kohina were about

to fight, this is what Kohina shouted about Kisara when Kisara went to intervene.

Even though Kohina thought that she could win or at least put up a good fight against Tina and tried to continue their match, the moment Kisara intervened, she put her swords away. Even Kohina, an Initiator, understood that she was at too much of a disadvantage if she had to fight Kisara. Against Kisara, an ordinary human.

Why hadn't he noticed before? The strongest person currently in the Tendo Civil Security Agency was—

Kisara brushed back her black hair. "Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style Zero, Number 3: *Azao Soutouken*. This is the name of the technique I used on you, Brother."

"S-style Zero…?" Kazumitsu whispered.

"It attacks once and then attacks again. The second attack is faster than the speed of sound. With your kinetic vision, I'm sure you only saw the first attack that repelled Kontensetsu. With the second attack, your legs were already cut off."

"N…no way… My spear was… The Tendo Martial Arts Divine Spear Style was……"

Watching Kazumitsu saying that in a daze, Kisara mercilessly put her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style Zero, Number 1 —"

"Kisara, no!"

"Kisara!"

"President Tendo!"

Rentaro, Enju, and Tina had decided not to interfere with this duel, but they had to yell out, unable to overlook this gruesome execution.

Kisara gave them one bored look before murmuring the name of the technique, not thinking of the circumstances. "—*Rasen Manzanka*."

There was a swift whistling sound, and then before they knew it, Kisara's sword had returned to its scabbard as if nothing had happened.

Everyone present at the scene gulped.

“Kisara, what…did you do to me?” Kazumitsu asked hesitatingly as he realized that nothing strange had happened to his body.

“I stopped the bleeding. There are still things I need you to tell me.”

When he looked, Kazumitsu saw that the blood spurting from his legs had stopped completely.

Kisara started to walk happily around Kazumitsu, who had lost both of his legs. “Now, Brother, since I won, I can feed you to the pigs like you promised, right?”

“N-no, please don’t! Please don’t kill me!”

Kisara placed her naked blade right at Kazumitsu’s throat. “Then, please talk. Ten years ago, my parents were killed in front of me by Gastrea; Satomi lost an arm, a leg, and an eye; and my kidneys started failing. Officially, it was seen as an incident caused by a wild Gastrea going astray. However, don’t you think it’s unlikely that a Gastrea would suddenly appear in the heart of Tokyo Area? That was premeditated murder by someone in the Tendo family. Someone released the wild Gastrea to kill Father and Mother. I know that you participated. Who else was involved in the crime? Answer me!”

“I…I don’t know!”

Kisara gave a thin smile. “Is that right? Then, I have no choice but to toss you into the stomach of a hungry pig while you are still alive.”

“N-no! Spare me, Kisara!” Kazumitsu seemed to think for a moment and then lifted his face up at Kisara pleadingly. “If I tell you… Will you spare me?”

“It depends on whether or not the information you have is useful or not.”

Kazumitsu ground his teeth and groaned. Rentaro thought he would probably talk. It was obvious even to Rentaro watching from the outside which way the profit-and-loss arithmetic inside Kazumitsu was going.

Above all, right now, Kazumitsu was being pressured by the revenge demon in front of him, and his teeth were chattering. “Th-there were five people involved in the plan. Me, Hyuga Tendo, Gentaku Tendo, Terutoshi Tendo, and Kikunojo Tendo.”

“Five people, huh? That’s less than I expected.”

“Now, with that—”

“Not yet. Brother, why did you kill Father and Mother?”

Kazumitsu lifted his face and looked at her plaintively. “The old man was going to blow the whistle on the dark dealings of the Tendo.”

“Dark dealings?”

“That’s right. The Tendo family is famous in the political world for turning out a large number of leaders. Of course, there were one or two dirty dealings in the process of creating that legacy. The old man suddenly had some sort of awakening of justice and said he was going to expose all of that. If he had, it would have been over for the Tendos. That’s why—”

“—you had no choice but to kill him? He was still your father, you know?”

“We only truly swear loyalty to our grandfather, Kikunojo. That man was not a father. After Mother died, he immediately remarried, this time with his mistress, and even had a child…” Just then, he looked at Kisara suddenly, taken aback, and his panic was obvious.

“It’s fine. It’s true that I’m the daughter of his mistress. You and our other brothers apparently called me a whore’s daughter behind my back, right?”

“I-I did not! It was all our older brothers. I did not say that!”

Kisara glanced at him coldly. “I don’t care about that. Well, why did you attack me and Satomi, too?”

“You two were only six and seven back then. Even if we explained our ideals to you, you would not have been able to understand. That’s why—”

“That’s why rather than have us suffer the loss of our parents, you thought you’d send us with them? That was kind of you.” Kisara smiled broadly. Because Rentaro knew the hatred chilled to absolute zero beneath that smile, Rentaro felt chilled, too.

“Th-that’s all of it. My information was useful, wasn’t it? So please, spare me.”

“That’s true.” Kisara put her index finger underneath her chin and nodded

cutely. “That’s fine.”

“Huh?”

“I said, that’s fine. The information you brought me was extremely useful. Thanks to that, my revenge has been considerably narrowed down.”

Kazumitsu looked dazed for a while, and then hugged Kisara’s legs. “Th-thank you! Thank you! I-I will mend my ways from now on. Really, I will!”

For a second, Kisara looked at Kazumitsu like he was a bug, and then she nodded at Rentaro. “Satomi, Enju, Tina, let’s go.”

After watching Kisara walk briskly out of the dojo, Rentaro and the girls also followed her out of the dojo, looking back and forth between Kisara and Kazumitsu.

The moment they stepped outside, they were met with orange rays of light that blinded their eyes, and the chorus of cicadas sounded an octave higher. The cirrocumulus clouds in the sky were dyed red.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Kazumitsu’s grateful voice continued. Rentaro wasn’t sure if it was a reaction to being freed from the terror of Kisara or what, but Kazumitsu’s voice seemed to be on repeat like a broken record and showed no sign of stopping.

Walking in front of them, Kisara stopped suddenly and said without turning around, “Satomi, it’s too noisy. Can you close the door?”

After Kisara said that to him, Rentaro hurried back and slid the sliding door of the dojo shut. Even so, he could still hear the slight sound of a voice shouting “Thank you!”

“Kisara, I wasn’t sure what was going to happen, but you did a good job holding back,” said Rentaro.

“Satomi, there is no move in my Sword Drawing Style that stops bleeding.”

“Huh?”

Kisara kept her back to him as she stretched out her left hand levelly and snapped her fingers.

“Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style Zero, Number 1: *Rasen Manzanka*, Open. I will have my revenge.”

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion roared inside the dojo, and the windows and sliding doors were splattered with something bright red.

For an instant, the world became still, and the cicadas stopped their chirping.

The next moment, a high-pitched scream could be heard coming from inside the dojo.

Enju, Tina, and Rentaro all seemed to be caught in a spell and were unable to move.

Rentaro’s body started shaking wildly on its own. *Don’t tell me, don’t tell me—*

He had to check. Rentaro slowly put his hand to the bloody sliding door and pulled it open. The stifling smell of blood rushed into his nostrils. The strength left the lower half of his body, and the next thing he knew, he was on his knees, his eyes still open wide.

Inside, what had once been Kazumitsu was now scattered all over the place. The woman who had once been his secretary continued screaming as she desperately tried to gather pieces of what used to be her boss.

Her scream, which made the hair of those listening stand on end, was the scream of someone who had lost their senses. The mental state of the secretary named Shiina would probably not be able to return to the world of reason and sanity.

Rentaro closed the sliding door again and turned around.

Kisara was holding her stomach with both arms as she laughed. She seemed unable to hold it in any longer and threw her head back to look up at the sky, laughing loudly.

“Rentaro, open your eyes. She’s tricking you. That woman is a monster!”

Kisara spread her arms and turned back to look at him. She was smiling happily from the bottom of her heart. “Hey, look, Satomi. Look, Satomi! I did it. I finally defeated one of the people I needed to defeat to avenge Father and Mother. Isn’t it amazing! Come on, look!”

Even when the excited Kisara rushed into Rentaro's chest, Rentaro wasn't sure if this was reality or not. Of course, one of the reasons he was surprised was that Kisara, who blushed when she just held hands with a boy, had suddenly rushed into his chest, but besides that, what was with Kisara's attitude?

He had thought that he wanted to hold this beautiful woman in his arms forever. He had thought that he wanted her for himself. So then why was his body shaking right now? Why did Rentaro feel chills from Kisara's arms wrapping around him?

Her lips were a glossy red. Her eyes shone brightly with excitement. She was so beautiful it gave him goose bumps. "I can win, Satomi. Right now, I can kill all the Tendos!"

And then, Kisara looked at him suspiciously. "What's wrong? You're not happy, Satomi? I was finally able to get my revenge on one person. I defeated one of the people who stole your arm and leg. Isn't this *our* revenge?"

"It's *your* execution!" Rentaro put both his hands on Kisara's shoulders and shook her hard. "Why did you kill our brother, Kazumitsu?! I didn't think there would be that much of a difference in power between two master initiates. But you knew before you started, didn't you?! Why did you kill him?!"

Kisara tilted her head slightly. She looked like she didn't understand what Rentaro was saying.

"Kisara, this is no good. Right now, you're crazy! You're wrong. Kisara. You always tell me to carry out justice, don't you? Where's the justice in what you just did?!"

Kisara slipped out of Rentaro's arms and clasped her hands behind her back, moving backward a step. "Satomi, I just realized. You couldn't punish the mastermind behind the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorist Incident, Kikunojo Tendo. You couldn't punish the mastermind behind the Seitenshi Sniping Incident, Sougen Saitake. But I was able to punish the person responsible for the Third Kanto Battle, Kazumitsu Tendo. Do you know why?"

The ends of Kisara's mouth turned upward.

"That's because I'm evil. Your fist of justice could not reach Kikunojo Tendo or

Sougen Saitake. Don't you understand? Justice isn't good enough. Justice can't oppose evil. Absolute evil that goes beyond evil can. I have that power. I am convinced of that now! With my absolute evil that gathers hatred, I can kill everyone. I have that power!"

"Please be careful, Leader. She smells strongly of destruction. She seems to be easily drawn to darkness." Midori's voice echoed in his head.

Rentaro slowly shook his head from side to side. He gasped as he squeezed out his words. "No, Kisara. Don't go to that side… No… You won't be able to come back."

Kisara tilted her head. "What are you saying?"

Then, she realized that she was even looking reproachfully at Enju and Tina, and looked a little embarrassed.

"I'm going home." Saying that, she turned around and walked away.

The setting sun the color of blood sent Kisara's long shadow onto the ground.

"That's…not Kisara," said Enju, shaking.

"Big Brother, that's…" Tina paled as she looked at Rentaro.

"That's right, Tina. That's the real Kisara Tendo, the Tendo Killer… No, she's gotten worse since before."

Rentaro's heart sank. *Kisara, you haven't changed at all since a year ago, have you?*

He remembered the conversation they had, lying in the grass before the Monolith collapsed, but it felt like a distant memory. Kisara had told Rentaro that she had recently been having nightmares.

"I realized that I was crying because I understood that this happiness had to end some day."

"I killed them. I killed everyone in the world."

Rentaro lowered his eyelids slowly.

The end that she knew would come someday.

The days she knew were lies.

But this was…

He opened his eyes resolutely.

As he watched Kisara's back disappear beyond the setting sun, he said, "Tina, Enju. I will tell you two this, at least. I might have to become Kisara's enemy."

"I'm back."

Kisara didn't expect an answer as she spoke into the empty office at the agency. She closed the door with her hand behind her and walked around the work desk to sit in the executive chair.

She suddenly felt tired, like she could fall asleep just sitting there. But then she remembered something and opened the drawer of the work desk and pulled out a framed picture. Inside the frame was the image of the family she had lost.

It was a picture from right after Rentaro had come to live with them: Kisara was in the middle, and she held hands with her mother and father. Six-year-old Kisara was all smiles sandwiched between her parents. She had no way of knowing the misfortune that would befall her after this…

Rentaro was looking around shiftily, as he stood, bored, at the edge of the picture. *Satomi was cute back then*, she thought, petting the surface of the picture softly.

"Father, Mother, I did it. I finally defeated one. I will definitely send the other four to join him."

No voice answered her. The stillness of the agency had never felt as painful as it felt today.

Kisara stood and went to the window, looking at the world with clouds lit by afterglow. And then, she thought of her four sworn enemies who were somewhere outside of that window. Each one was a master initiate of the Tendo Style. She did not expect to survive her fights with them.

But gaining something meant giving up something else.

She had given up everything. She had long given as an offering the happiness of falling in love with a boy, having a child, and creating a warm family.

God would not manifest himself. But neither would the devil.

In this world with no god, the only thing she could believe in and rely on was her sword. Her demon sword that slurped up mud and was polished with blood. The heretical sword. The sword of revenge. She would definitely make the remaining four rust on her blade.

And then, once she successfully had a bloodbath with those four, she herself would be…

Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in her lower abdomen, and her face twisted in pain as she crouched down. “Ow……”

Her kidneys, which had given up on purifying their own body, were throbbing. As she felt the throbbing pain of toxins dirtying her body endlessly, she pounded the window with her fist. There was the sound of a crack as the glass broke radially, and Kisara spit out a curse at her enemies from the bottom of her stomach. “Hyuga Tendo, Gentaku Tendo, Terutoshi Tendo, Kikunojo Tendo—Everyone… I will kill you!”

First, there was darkness.

There was the strange feeling of floating around in space. The individual was stretched, up became down, down became left, and left was inverted, becoming something else.

He didn’t know who he was. Not even that was certain anymore. His own existence had probably disappeared. Who was he?

“Wake up.”

He heard that voice, and it felt as if he was being pulled out from the bottom of a body of water. Opening his eyes slightly, he was exposed to light many times brighter than the sun and groaned.

It took him some time to realize that it was the white light of a halogen lamp mounted above an operating table.

He had probably been made to lie faceup. He couldn’t feel his limbs. His body wasn’t free. His vision was trapped. What state was he in?

Suddenly, he saw an empty black dot in his vision where the halogen lamp had shined.

A fierce-looking man was looking down at him. The man's hair and beard were connected like a lion's mane. He felt like he had seen that man before—that face that was full to the brim with confidence.

"Who…are you?" He realized that he could talk.

"Huh. You came to without knowing who I was, huh? Oh well, can you remember your own name?"

"Name……" He was surprised. He remembered. "I'm…Shoma…Shoma Nagisawa…"

"Oh, you remembered? When we retrieved your body from the center of the explosion, they said you would have a hard time even regaining consciousness. You're a very surprising man."

His thoughts accelerated one after another. That's right, he had been fighting to defeat Aldebaran, and he had accomplished that. And then—

"I did some research on you. Apparently, you were a master who studied those abominable Tendo techniques. It really is regrettable."

"Regrettable? What…are you saying…? Where am I…? What happened…to me…?"

"Whoops, it would probably be wiser if you do not look at yourself. Right now, your arms and legs have all been blown away, one eye has been crushed, your hair has melted, and seventy percent of your body is covered in burns. If you had not received the most advanced medical care the year 2031 could offer, you would have died."

"Wha…?" Then the reason why he couldn't move his body the way he wanted was not because he was restrained or anything like that…

Before he knew it, another four shadows appeared and surrounded Shoma, looking down at him. The halogen lamp made them backlit, and he could not make out their features. Including the first man, there were five of them, with a total of ten eyeballs appraising him.

"This man has won the favor of the venerable Mr. Grünewald? I cannot believe it," said one of the shadows.

The lionlike man responded. “It’s not that hard to believe. I like him. I want this guy.”

Unable to stand the incomprehensible conversation around him, Shoma groaned. “…What are you? What in the world…are you people?”

The lion man coolly chanted, “We are the Five Wings Syndicate. There is no need for you to know more than that right now.”

“Five Wings…Syndicate?”

“If we leave you like this, you’ll die soon. However, there is just one way for you to be saved.”

The man grinned. “Wanna take me up on that one, kid?”

Rentaro had his elbow on the train car window and was looking absentmindedly outside. The scenery was flashing quickly by before his eyes. The city, the people, and the scenery were all the embodiment of peace.

Peace had returned to Tokyo Area. The once widespread violence was quickly subjugated, and the people who had fled Tokyo Area on airplanes also returned.

Rentaro gave a big sigh.

In the process of restoring order to the area, a number of kinks were found. Winning shelter tickets were stolen and swindled, there were counterfeits, of course, and since women and children were given priority, there were men who had dressed up as women in order to get rations inside the shelter. There were even two self-defense force troops who were arrested when they tried to get on the last flight out of the area with underground tickets.

Rentaro was also flabbergasted to find that there were a large number of civil officers mixed in with the people who were coming back by plane. They had promptly run away and abandoned Tokyo Area, and they came back looking as if nothing had happened.

“Mphntaro.”

Rentaro tilted his head when he heard this and saw Enju stuffing chocolate in her mouth as she chewed, getting her mouth dirty.

He tapped Enju’s forehead lightly. “Idiot, don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Hmph,” said Enju sullenly.

Watching her face, he was glad in his heart that Enju had recovered.

The other day, Rentaro and Enju had attended the funeral of the girls who were his students. Kisara and Tina were saddened by their deaths, and Enju had cried loudly the whole time. Seeing that, Rentaro thought from the bottom of his heart that he was glad he brought Enju with him.

Funerals were places to mourn the dead, but at the same time, they were also places for the living to sever ties with the dead. Enju cried and cried and cried, and that probably allowed her to finally be able to give up any regrets she had about the girls who had passed. Those girls probably did not want the lives of those still alive to be continually influenced by shadows of their deaths.

Seeing the bones of the girls at the crematorium, Enju murmured, “When people die, they turn into ashes and smoke, huh…?”

For some reason, Rentaro could still hear her saying that in his head.

They also saw the old man, Matsuzaki. All of his precious students were gone, so Rentaro was prepared for the man to be spitting curses, but contrary to Rentaro’s expectations, the man came over and thanked him over and over, making Rentaro feel perplexed and embarrassed.

“I’m sure the girls were happy. Thank you for looking after them,” the man repeated as he grasped Rentaro’s hand.

Rentaro accepted that with mixed feelings.

Ever since that day, Kisara had hidden the Tendo Killer and returned to being her usual self. No, it was probably more accurate to say that she *appeared* to have returned to her normal self. Even when Rentaro tried to talk about what happened then, she avoided the subject. However, ever since that day, there was no doubt that something inside Kisara had definitely changed.

There were four people left for Kisara to get revenge on. The only time to confront her about this was when she appeared as the Tendo Killer.

“Rentaro, I’m getting nervous. Do you think my outfit’s all right?” When he looked, he saw Enju turn around once for him. She was dressed up in her best clothes, wearing a brightly colored dress. It was an understatement to say she looked lovely, but he didn’t want to tell her that directly, so he just said curtly, “Well, it’s probably fine.”

And then, Rentaro also looked at his own clothes. He was wearing a pure white formal suit that he had worn before, for another ceremony. Rentaro and Enju were on this train headed to Tokyo Area’s First District, where they had been invited to the Seitenshi’s palace to attend a decoration ceremony. This time, Enju was also with him.

Rentaro thought he knew that he had taken heroic actions, but it was still hard for him to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling he got when he was called a hero. Apparently in war, those who ordered the deaths were the ones who benefited, but the real heroes weren’t people like Rentaro. The real heroes were those who threw their lives away and died glorious deaths without even having their names made known. They were people like Midori Fuse, Shoma Nagisawa, Nagamasa Gado, and a great many other civil officers and self-defense force troops. Not Rentaro.

Shoma and Midori were both gone. They had already gone past the boundary to the world beyond and now existed there. Rentaro would never be able to see them again in this life.

He himself would likely also have to make a decision soon to live or die.

Rentaro shook his head. He was glad at least that the Family Register Revocation Law had been rejected in the National Diet. The danger still remained that they would look for a chance to present it again, but this could be called a modest victory for Rentaro and the others.

On a different day, he had been cross-examined by Enju about how he had knocked her unconscious without permission during the fight with Aldebaran. She cried and hit him and finally bit at his head, and he couldn’t get her off no matter how hard he pulled.

They finally struck a deal after she made him swear by the “pledge” the teary-eyed Enju wrote in messy letters.

“I will not face the enemy by myself.”

“I will do everything with Enju from now on.”

As he was being made to read the pledge with such conditions written into it, Rentaro realized that he was crossing his fingers where Enju couldn’t see them. If another time came when only one of them, either Enju or him, could be saved, he would do the same thing to Enju without hesitation. That was his own way of showing his path to the one he loved who was too close yet too far away. Rentaro Satomi did not know how to show Enju Aihara his love in any other way.

He checked the time. At this rate, they were cutting it close on whether or not they would make it to the ceremony on time. If he was even a minute late, it was obvious that Kisara would nag at him at the Seitenshi’s palace again, so he definitely wanted to avoid that this time.

But just then, there was a clang, and the train suddenly slowed down, and the grips all shook at once.

An announcement was played inside the train. “There has been a passenger injury before the Tokyo Area District 3 station. The train will be stopped for a while.”

They were definitely going to be late now.

Rentaro noticed that he had clicked his tongue without realizing it.

Just then, Enju murmured in a faint and forlorn voice, “Rentaro, why do people jump…? Are they in pain? Are they having a hard time? Isn’t there anything we can do for them…?”

Rentaro was shocked. Just now, he had been more concerned about the train being late than about a person’s life. He hugged Enju close with a shaking arm and buried his face in his chest, closing his eyes tightly.

“Wh-what’s the matter, Rentaro?”

“I’m afraid of myself. I’ve become numb to the deaths of others. Enju, please stay with me forever. Please don’t leave me.”

Enju smiled with mixed feelings. “Don’t worry, Rentaro. You and I will always, always be together.”

- Enju Aihara has a Gastrea virus corrosion rate of 43.5%
- An estimated 520 days left until shape collapse

AFTERWORD

Where is the balance between art and compromise? Authors in particular are said by society to have absolute authority from the minute they open up a text editor and start working to when they finish their work, but that is not necessarily true. Time limits especially can expose dilemmas of quality and compromise that affect their work and with much headache.

Depending on the person, the idea that anyone can create something good with enough time could be true or false, but either way, compromise is necessary. It might sound good to have your own style and never listen to other's demands, but acting arrogantly like that is like stepping on a tiger's tail—those who do it would not be able to remain authors for long.

By the way, what about Shiden Kanzaki? Ever since he was admitted into the Dengeki group, he's been an impertinent transfer student, ignoring industry customs immediately after entering and doing crazy things, making the chief editor call him out and yell at him, not thinking about profits as he made changes over and over and making the sales department mad at him. Anyway, he's a terrible problem child.

It's impossible to count the number of times he's said, "No, I won't hand it over!" and caused trouble for his managing editor by not handing over the manuscript on hand.

Yes, even I have started to reflect on my style and the trouble I've continued to cause for others, and I have started to doubt my thoughts from their core.

My smart readers might give me the advice to use the 80-20 rule. Pros are able to finish 80 percent of the quality with 20 percent of the effort, but in order to get the remaining 20 percent of the quality, it would take 80 percent of the effort, so it's not worth it.

Kind readers might try to comfort me with Sturgeon's Law. Since 90 percent of everything is crap, at least we sometimes make something good.

Where is the balance between art and compromise?

In the first place, is compromise really necessary? Compromise is like knocking down dominoes, where if you compromise once, then little by little, it'll spread to everything.

Like many people have said of the entertainment industry in particular, the speed of supply and demand is clearly different from ten years ago. Let's call the speed of that change a raging rapid.

If I were to be loved by the editorial department and the sales department and my managing editor—but then throw out a work that the readers find boring on the stormy seas of the entertainment industry, will I really be able to smile at that point?

Shiden Kanzaki wants to leave behind something that readers will truly find of value *because* of the age we live in.

Of course, works have their waves, and it is a difficult trick to maintain the balance of quality. More importantly, in a series, I have never really seen anything that has been able to keep things continually interesting all the time. But I think aiming for that as much as I can is very meaningful.

I have reached a good conclusion. I'm a problem child bastard after all, who thinks there's no point in telling a story if I have to compromise on its quality. I apologize to everyone who is involved. I intend to continue causing problems from now on, so please cooperate with me in creating a good book.

THIS MONTH'S KUROSAKI

At one point, he called me at his wits' end. "We seriously won't make the manuscript delivery! You've gathered dragon balls for this moment, right? If you don't use them now, when will you use them? Hurry up and summon Shen Long, please!" he said. It's come to the point where even my managing editor is pleading for a Shen Long summons.

The cruel reality is that we authors and editors who prize objective and logical thought above all are resorting to entreating the gods. Oh dear, is this book really going to be all right……?

REGARDING THE MANGA VERSION

About half a month after the publication of this book, on August 27, the comic version of *Black Bullet* will begin serialization in the magazine *Dengeki Maoh*. It is drawn by the runner-up of the Thirteenth Dengeki Comics Grand Prix, Morinohon. Please look forward there to the efforts of the cool Rentaro and adorable Enju, as drawn by his sharp, precious brush.

This time, I'd also like to thank my managing editor, Mr. Kurosaki, who stayed with me patiently as I didn't quite meet the scheduled deadline; the illustrator, Saki Ukai, who did the character designs for all the excessive new characters; Morinohon, who is in charge of the comic version; everyone in the editorial department; and everyone else involved with this book.

Finally, to my dear readers who have taken this book in their hands. Um, well, in this volume, the merciless developments continue… But next time, there'll be lots of Lolita-complex and breasts, so please wait!

Thank you very much for buying this book.

I pray that all of my readers will be blessed.

Shiden Kanzaki

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BLACK BULLET, Volume 4

SHIDEN KANZAKI

Translation by Nita Lieu Cover art by Saki Ukai

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

BLACK BULLET, Volume 4

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Edited by ASCII Media Works

First published in Japan in 2012 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2016 by Yen Press, LLC

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1290 Avenue of the Americas

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First Yen On Edition: August 2016

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kanzaki, Shiden, author. | Ukai, Saki, illustrator. | Lieu, Nita, translator.

Title: Black bullet. Volume 4, Vengeance is mine / Shiden Kanzaki ; illustrations by Saki Ukai ; translation by Nita Lieu.

Other titles: Vengeance is mine Description: New York : Yen On, 2016. | Series: Black bullet ; 4

Identifiers: LCCN 2016013677 | ISBN 9780316344913 (paperback) Subjects: | CYAC: Science fiction. | Monsters--Fiction. | Survival--Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K29 Blad 2016 | DDC [FIc]—dc23 LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2016013677

ISBNs: 978-0-31634491-3 (paperback) 978-0-316-34498-2 (ebook)

E3-20160722-JV-PC